

Thai junta uses arms find to justify political repression

Our reporter
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Five people accused by Thailand's military junta of hoarding military weapons were charged on Thursday. The charges are a thinly veiled attempt to suppress political opposition and potentially to create a pretext for delaying or calling off elections promised for next year.

A legal official from the military's National Committee for Peace and Order (NCPO) filed a police report last week with the Crime Suppression Division, the government agency that handles allegations of criminal activity and corruption.

Police General Srivara Ransibrahmanakul alleged that 32 grenades and ammunition had been discovered the previous week in a rice field in Chachoengsao Province near Bangkok. Without providing a shred of evidence, he immediately linked the arms to the political unrest that preceded the 2014 military coup that ousted the elected prime minister, Yingluck Shinawatra.

The five people face charges of conspiring to possess firearms, ammunition, or war-grade explosives. They include Jakrapob Penkair, who served as a minister in the Yingluck government, and retired Major General Manas Paolik, who was Third Army Deputy Chief under Yingluck's brother Thaksin Shinawatra. Thaksin was ousted in a military coup in 2006.

Both men already have outstanding arrest warrants following the 2014 coup, as part of the military's crackdown on Yingluck's Pheu Thai Party. Manas Paolik has handed himself over to Thai authorities.

The other three accused are political activists in the so-called "Red Shirt" movement associated with the Shinawatras that was bitterly opposed by the Bangkok elites including the military. The billionaire Thaksin built a social base of support among the rural and urban poor with a series of limited handouts.

Watana Sapwichien, Somjet Kongwatana, and

Chaiwat Polpho (also known as Peak Kalamae) have all denied any connection to the arms cache. They were all arrested and charged with supplying weapons during the Bangkok demonstrations in 2014, despite a lack of evidence. Watana turned himself into authorities immediately after the accusations were made last week.

Police General Srivara initially claimed that the investigation pointed towards a different group of Red Shirts led by Wuthipong "Ko Tee," allegedly a more hard-line member of the Thaksin-affiliated United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD). In 2014 he fled the country over lèse-majesté charges after an interview he gave for a VICE documentary.

In its three years of power, the junta has imposed its own "constitution" which undermines the rights to assembly and free speech, limits access to information critical of the government, and hands unlimited powers to the cabinet.

Prayuth and his cronies continue to delay the promised national election, while stifling political opposition groups. Since the 2014 coup, at least 80 people have been tried for peaceful assembly, 27 people have been charged for criticizing the regime and another 56 for criticizing the royal family.

The junta has exploited the arms cache as yet another justification to continue the suppression of political rights for parties and individuals. "After considering the overall situation, and not just the recent discovery of war weapons, it was not deemed appropriate to lift the ban on political activities," a NCPO statement declared on Monday.

The statement continued by saying the loosening of restrictions on political activity and movement "could bring about other problems," and that the government "needed to draw a line to contain the conflict in order to avoid damage to the country."

Opposition politicians have criticised the junta's actions. A key UDD leader Weng Tojirakarn said that the NCPO should stop looking for scapegoats and fulfil its promise to hold new national elections. He said it was questionable why weapons were found every time the government faced difficulties. People had been demanding a lifting of the political ban and "out of the blue" an arms cache was found.

The junta is clearly fearful of rising social and political tensions, and the eruption of another round of mass protests. It exploited the year-long period of mourning over the death of former King Bhumibol, who served somewhat as a linchpin for the ruling class factions, to block political opposition.

However, the period of mourning is over and King Vajiralongkorn who ascended the throne at the end of October, is widely disliked. Many consider him to be another disgraceful member of the ruling elite who has no concern for the well-being of the population. Despite some previous connection to the Shinawatras, he is now as tightly bound to the military as his father was.

Despite optimistic reports about Thailand's economic growth, unemployment is growing and the gulf between rich and poor is widening. The Nation reported this week that the official figures that grossly underestimate unemployment rose by 1.3 percent, which, it commented, was "unprecedented amid economic recovery." Employment fell in all sectors, with the industrial and manufacturing sectors recording a 4 percent drop.

The opposition political parties are seeking to defuse the rising levels of discontent and alienation by steering it into elections—as they did in 2010 after months of mass protests against the Democrat government that had been installed by the military. Now the Democrats are seeking to salvage their political reputation by distancing themselves from the junta. The Democrat and Pheu Thai parties are now reportedly considering a coalition for the national election that is due to place next November.



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