

Thailand's parliament proposes phoney amnesty bill

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A 32-member special parliamentary committee in Thailand has been established to draft a so-called amnesty bill that would supposedly grant pardons for various offences incurred during periods of political upheaval and protest in the country over the past two decades.

The committee has been tasked with merging three rival proposals passed on July 16 in the lower house of the National Assembly that would cancel select criminal charges and convictions between 2005 and 2022. This period covers major events including the military coups of 2006 and 2014, the judicial coup of 2008, the bloody military suppression of “Red Shirt” protesters in 2010, and the mass student demonstrations in 2020–2021.

The portrayal of a broad amnesty being granted in order to promote “social harmony” is a fraud. The bills approved in the Thai parliament were presented by three right-wing parties: the Bhumjaithai Party (BJT), the United Thai Nation Party (UTN), and the Kla Tham Party (KT). Both UTN and KT are breakaways from the Palang Pracharath Party, founded by the junta that carried out the 2014 coup and the ruling, military-backed party until 2023.

Common to all three bills were exclusions for those charged or convicted under the draconian *lèse-majesté* law, Section 112 of the criminal code, which illegalises any criticism of the monarchy. The BJT added a specific clause banning support for amnesty for *lèse-majesté*. Section 112 is often used as a catch-all for the state to violate democratic rights and intimidate protesters with potential jail terms of up to 15 years.

The refusal to provide amnesty in *lèse-majesté* cases and to even ban support for such a move reflects the fact that the monarchy serves as the linchpin of Thailand’s capitalist establishment at a time when

sharp tensions are growing within Thailand and the ruling class.

Other offences related to demonstrations against military-backed governments and for democratic rights have also been excluded from the approved bills. These include contempt of court, damage to public property, and noise violations. These exclusions consciously target hundreds if not thousands of youth and working-class demonstrators.

A large portion of those excluded from amnesty were participants in the 2020–2021 student-led protests that erupted following the military’s rigging of the 2019 general election and the dissolution of the Future Forward Party, the forerunner of the People’s Party (PP).

According to the Thai Lawyers for Human Rights (TLHR) organisation, at least 5,057 people have been charged with a crime for exercising their rights to free speech and assembly since 2006. TLHR points out that it does not have access to information in every case and that the actual figures are likely much higher.

Furthermore, nearly 40 percent or 1,977 of these cases stem from 2020 onwards. TLHR states that from this figure, 1,218 people would not benefit from the approved amnesty bills or would only partially benefit, meaning some but not all charges would be dropped.

During the military administration of the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO), in power from 2014–2019, many were also prosecuted for opposing the junta’s orders or expressing opposition to the rewriting of Thailand’s constitution. Hundreds were tried in military courts, resulting in unfair trials. These charges and prosecutions were also not included in the three “amnesty” bills approved by parliament.

Therefore, a bill, if passed, would provide amnesty for right-wing political activists and party officials, as

well as those who took part in the killing of protesters in 2010. That year, the military gunned down 80 “Red Shirt” demonstrators and injured more than 2,100 people. The Red Shirts criticised military rule and supported Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra ousted in a military coup in 2006. Red Shirts charged during this period will also not be covered under the proposed amnesty bills.

These so-called amnesty bills are in reality meant to allow the state and its accomplices to suppress pro-democracy and anti-government protests with complete impunity. The former ruling junta already provided immunity for military figures involved in the 2014 coup in the constitution that it drafted. Section 279 states that, “All announcements and orders of the NCPO and orders of the Head of the NCPO are to be considered as constitutional and legal, and shall continue to be valid.”

The move to excuse the crimes of the right-wing and pro-military figures is taking place amid deep social divisions in society, exacerbated by the crisis of capitalism internationally. This has led to declining economic growth, job losses, and the eruption of a military conflict with Cambodia last month over their disputed border.

Trump’s imposition of a 19 percent tariff on all Thai exports to the US, announced on July 31, will compound the country’s economic and social crisis. Thailand’s economy is expected to grow only 1.8 percent this year and 1.7 percent next year, lower than the 2.5 percent growth in 2024. Thailand faces the slowest growth among ASEAN countries.

Under these conditions, the consolidated amnesty bill is being tailored to enable a rapprochement between rival sections of the ruling class in preparation for suppressing the class struggle that will inevitably emerge. At the same time, it is meant to give the appearance that Thailand’s period of political turmoil and coups is over. This is despite the fact that even as the bill is being drafted, Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra has been suspended by the Constitutional Court in a judicial coup over her handling of the border dispute with Cambodia, which erupted into an armed conflict last month.

The ruling Pheu Thai Party did not put forward its own bill, but supported the three from the right-wing parties while opposing a bill by the People’s Party and

another backed by TLHR in cooperation with similar civil organisations.

Pheu Thai has implicitly rejected amnesty for lèse-majesté charges in cooperation with the right-wing and pro-military parties. Pheu Thai spokesman and MP Danuporn Punnakanta claimed, “We don’t want these bills to spark massive protests that could affect the structural integrity of the country.” A Pheu Thai-proposed amnesty bill in 2013 was seized upon by right-wing forces to stage protests against the government of Yingluck Shinawatra that ultimately led to the 2014 coup.

Pheu Thai also reportedly does not want to be accused of seeking amnesty for Thaksin, who currently faces lèse-majesté charges related to an interview he gave to the South Korean *Chosun Ilbo* newspaper in 2015. A ruling in this case is expected on August 22.

The role of the so-called “progressive” People’s Party in this affair has been to lend the debate over the amnesty bills an air of legitimacy. The PP has sought to convince its supporters that the parliamentary debate over amnesty can be turned into a defence of pro-democracy protesters and democratic rights. Yet the PP knows full well the right-wing and pro-military parties that dominate parliament actively oppose this.

These right-wing parties and their allies in the courts manoeuvred and schemed to block the PP’s predecessor, the Move Forward Party (MFP), from forming a government after it won the 2023 general election; dissolved the MFP on lèse-majesté accusations; and removed one prime minister and is in the process of removing a second in judicial coups.

Yet, the PP’s own proposed bill did not include amnesty for lèse-majesté charges, but instead would have established a parliamentary committee to review individual cases. In other words, the PP tells its supporters to place faith in the very parties at the forefront of attacking basic democratic rights.



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