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Thailand Military Monopolizes Power, Crushes Liberty: Sadness, Not Happiness, Rules

By Doug Bandow

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Assistant Secretary of State Daniel Russel recently urged Thailand's junta to return power to the Thai people and respect rather than suppress their liberties. The regime angrily denounced his "interference" which "negatively affected the reputation of the country."

General turned Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha proclaimed his fealty to democracy: "I'm a soldier with a democratic heart." Alas, he has a strange way of showing it. He recently denounced those who challenged his "full power"-- backed by soldiers, guns, and prisons. Still, he explained, he could have arrested former Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra but chose not to. The classic "not as bad as Hitler" defense! Yet his government has just announced that it plans to prosecute her, while ignoring her predecessor, who left office with blood on his hands.

In fact, the comic-opera Chan-ocha isn't as bad as Hitler, but Freedom House ranks Thailand as "not free." Amnesty International reported "incidents of torture and other ill-treatment," including "beatings, death threats, mock executions and attempted asphyxiation." Detainees were forced to sign declarations of good treatment before being released. Last November Human Rights Watch's Brad Adams observed: "Respect for fundamental freedoms and democracy in Thailand under military rule has fallen into an apparently bottomless pit." The country now is less free than its neighbor Burma.

About the only people willing to risk protesting today are students. The Thai Student Centre for Democracy, which unites activists from across the political spectrum, recently organized a demonstration involving mock elections, resulting in several arrests. Junta spokesman Winthai Suvaree explained to Reuters: "We will use negotiation, but if they persist with their activities we will have to hand them over to police."

A lot of people have been handed over to police under military rule. Indeed, Mong Palatino recently produced a list of "normal activities" suppressed by the military since the May coup:

raising the three-finger Hunger Games salute, aiding arrested protestors, holding blank paper, displaying papers and placards with anti-coup messages, covering eyes, face, or mouth, holding or wearing red-shirts or t-shirts with political messages, selling products with former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra's face, talking to journalists, aiding arrested protestors, publicly reading George Orwell's 1984, criticizing the coup, meeting at McDonald's and the Hunger Games 3 premier, criticizing the coup on Facebook, wearing a "people" mask, playing France's La Marseillaise, holding academic seminars on politics, distributing a poem on democracy, and even eating a sandwich in public (seen as a political protest).

That's quite a list. Noted Palatino, it "reflects the paranoia of the junta leaders on one hand, and the suffering experience by ordinary Thais on the other." Chan-ocha claimed: "I want democracy to live on," but he won't allow the slightest criticism of his dictatorship.

Many of those arrested are released. However, some apparently remain in custody. Moreover, the military's rule is buttressed by private vigilantism. Noted Freedom House: "attacks on civil society leaders have been reported, and even in cases where perpetrators are prosecuted, there is a perception of impunity for the ultimate sponsors of the violence."

Media censorship is the foundation of the regime's misrule. In December Amnesty International's Richard Bennett noted "the abuse of the justice system and unrelenting use of repressive legislation" to silence criticism: "We are seeing a spiral into silence in Thailand--ongoing, harsh restrictions that are stifling free speech and suffocating a once vibrant civil society."

On taking power the military shut down all radio and many television stations, limiting those which could reopen and restricting their operations. Publications face prosecution and closure for criticizing the regime. Defamation cases have been used to silence both NGO activists and journalists. The military instructed the media not to report on Thaksin or his sister Yingluck. A television host who doubted the regime's wisdom was taken off the air. Chan-ocha bridled when questioned at a recent press conference, responding that the offending reporter would be "summoned too if you keep asking questions like this."

The regime also has stepped up its fight against a free internet, blocking disfavored sites. Human Rights Watch ended up on the banned list after it published a report critical of the government's practices. Dissidents have been charged with computer crimes. When a German foundation, the Friedrich-Ebert Stiftung, planned a forum on media restrictions, the junta "requested" that the group cancel the event.

Perhaps most insidious is the regime's use of lese-majeste law, with cases now heard before military courts, to target critics. Prosecutions have little to do with ensuring respect for the monarchy. Instead, noted Bennett, they are used to imprison political activists and deny "the space for debate." The junta distorts respect for the monarchy to undermine free expression and speech, even denying bail to critics in the name of "national security."

The regime also emphasizes indoctrination. The generals require students to learn Chan-ocha's "12 Core Values," which mostly involve obeying the general-prime minister-spiritual guide. Textbooks were revised to eliminate references to Thaksin. Universities are expected to monitor and discourage student activism.

Chan-ocha hosts a weekly television show, "Returning Happiness to the People." He even wrote a song on the same theme. Unsurprisingly, he teaches that the path to happiness is to obey him. The junta issued a propaganda film promoting obedience to the generals. While falling short of Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*, it did include a bizarre picture of Adolf Hitler, for which the regime later apologized. Will Chan-ocha next demand every Thai carry his equivalent of Mao Zedong's little red book of quotations?

In fact, Mao pioneered the use of the sort of self-criticism sessions employed by the junta. During the Cultural Revolution Red Guards forced the unlucky to confess their ideological crimes. Chan-ocha's enforcers do much the same today. At least 300 opposition leaders, academics, and other coup critics were summoned and often detained for "attitude adjustment" in the immediate aftermath of the coup. After the regime used its hand-picked "legislature" to convict Yingluck in a show trial in December, a number of leaders in her government, including parliamentarian Worachai Hema, criticized the legal charade. The junta summoned many of them for similar brow-beating. In Worachai's case a colonel visited the former's home.

The regime leavens Maoism with a touch of 1984. The generals call themselves the National Council for Peace and Order. Deputy Foreign minister Don Paramatwinai even criticized Assistant Secretary Russel for citing the "coup," claiming that "the military takeover in Thailand is not a coup, theoretically speaking." Rather, "it was in fact a revolution to install stability."

Russel offended the generals by criticizing their use of a rubber-stamp political assembly to convict Yingluck for corruption based on a wasteful rice support program--which, though foolish, was no different than any other special interest spending program. The prosecution was part of a campaign to destroy Thaksin's political organization, which has won every election since 2001. While Yingluck was barred from office for five years and even faces a ten-year jail term, the regime has yet to prosecute any military-friendly establishment figure, even those charged with killing pro-Thaksin demonstrators five years ago. "Justice" obviously works only one way in Chan-ocha's Thailand.

After her conviction Yingluck wrote on her Facebook page that "Today democracy in Thailand died, and so did the rule of law." But the regime ordered her to cancel a planned press conference. Russel diplomatically observed: "When an elected leader is deposed, impeached by the authorities that implemented the coup, and then targeted with criminal charges while basic democratic processes and institutions are interrupted, the international community is left with the impression that these steps could be politically driven." Could be?

The regime's routine repression raises the question how long the opposition will remain quiescent. Chan-ocha exhibited the pretensions of North Korea's original "Great Leader" after seizing power: "Thai people, like me, have probably not been happy for nine years, but since [the coup] there is happiness." Just call him Mr. Happy!

But it isn't new-found happiness which so far has caused the public to remain largely quiescent. Thaksin is thought to have counseled his followers to stay off the streets. Rumors even abound that he has been negotiating with the military to reach some kind of modus vivendi. However, Jonathan Head of BBC suggested that this deal "must now be presumed to be off" with Yingluck's conviction. If violence does erupt, the generals will have no one to blame but themselves, having left people believing they have no alternative.

Equally important is the long-term. The interim constitution, "drafted without public consultation," noted Freedom House, provided "unchecked powers and no human rights protections." That appears to be the military's long-term plan as well. Constitutional revision is underway, and the junta is determined to rig the system to prevent the rural majority from ever again controlling the government. There is talk of creating an appointed senate, mandating a military prime minister, and making it easy to overthrow a government which actually sought to govern.

There are plenty of apologists for dictatorship, many of whom take support for democracy as shilling for Thaksin. Elites in business as well as the military, court, and bureaucracy fear and detest Thaksin in equal measure. And for understandable reasons. He engaged in self-dealing and ignored legal restraints, allowing the police to engage in a murderous campaign against drug traffickers. His critics accuse him of corruption, though these claims are unproven.

Yet many of his fiercest critics are no better. Noted Freedom House, both major parties "include numerous former lawmakers who have faced persistent corruption allegations." Indeed, BBC's Head reported that Thailand is "a country which has long been plagued by corruption at every level of officialdom, and where the criminal justice system barely functions." Even members of the military, including Chan-ocha's brother, another general, have prospered mightily while serving in the armed forces. The so-called Democrat Party grew out of earlier military rule and relied on authoritarian tactics in power.

The real complaint is that Thaksin overturned the predictable power structure benefiting urban elites. For the most part, those fixated on Thaksin make little pretense of caring about what the members of the poor majority believe and why. Thaksin won because he appealed to the forgotten and ignored. The Economist noted that the two Shinawatras "did much to transform the lives of some of the country's worse off. The old elites resented this, not least because they liked to think of the king traditionally atop an ordered hierarchy with deferential peasants at the bottom grateful for royal charity." Many who support the coup apparently want to put the poor back in their place of being forgotten and ignored.

Thailand's best hope is genuine constitutional reform. Government power should be limited, especially to award economic favors. Federalism should rule, giving provinces more authority to serve communities at odds with the national government. Public institutions such as the Constitutional Court and Anti-Corruption Commission should be cleansed of establishment favoritism. Repressive laws, including lese majeste restrictions, should be repealed. If government didn't matter so much, the two sides wouldn't need to fight so fiercely for control.

Political reconciliation also requires a new set of personalities. Thai politics would be best rid of the Thaksin family as well as DP leaders, who effectively abandoned electoral politics and used the security forces to gun down pro-Thaksin protestors. Even more malign are Thaksin's street opponents who acted like Mussolini's Black Shirts and used rule or ruin tactics to destroy democracy. Suthep Thaugsuban, who as deputy prime minister was involved in violently suppressing demonstrations, modeled Mussolini last year when he used mobs to shut down the government and thwart new elections. Equally dangerous are military politicians prone to staging coups: although some observers thought Chan-ocha and his cronies once were acting on behalf of Suthep and the usual business-court elites, the military appears to be ruling for itself.

Obviously, the U.S. is powerless to restore liberty to Thailand. U.S. officials should continue to use the bully pulpit to highlight the junta's assault on basic freedoms. Washington also should limit cooperation with Bangkok, and especially the Thai military, in the future. If the regime responds by moving closer to authoritarian China, Washington should respond with a shrug.

"We are building democracy everyday" proclaimed dictator Chan-ocha. No, he isn't. Instead, "Mr. Happy" and his cronies are bringing smiles to self-interested elites, not the people.

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