

# The Japan Times

## Thai military delivers oppression, not happiness

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WASHINGTON – Thailand long has been the land of smiles, a friendly, informal place equally hospitable to backpackers and businessmen. But politics has gotten ugly in recent years. Now a cartoonish dictator out of a Gilbert and Sullivan comic opera runs a not-so funny junta which jails opponents and suppresses free speech. The bombing of a popular Hindu shrine in Bangkok demonstrates the danger of terrorism becoming a tactic by the disaffected, in which case life in Thailand could generate far more frowns than smiles.

Gen. Prayuth Chan-ocha seized power last year promising happiness, prosperity and security. But the junta has failed to deliver all three.

Those denied political rights and civil liberties aren't happy. The generals also found that economic forces do not yield to military dictates.

The investigation of the recent Bangkok bombings yielded contradictory official claims, causing the government to threaten the public for circulating "false information." General-Prime Minister Prayuth suggested that the police watch the New York police drama "Blue Bloods" for help.

With the junta's failings evident to all, Generalissimo Prayuth bristles when criticized. Last week he ranted against those who urged rejection of the draft constitution, written to keep the military in control: "When the time comes, I will deal with them."

The dictator betrays a touch of comic megalomania. On taking power he declared that happiness had returned to Thailand.

Irritated with a journalist's question, he blustered: "Do you want me to use all of my powers? With my powers, I could shut down all media . . . I could have you shot." Hopefully he wasn't serious.

However, "Mr. Happy or Else" often has surrendered to his inner autocrat. Freedom House reported that the coup pushed Thailand backward from "partly free" to "not free," with a reduction in civil liberties and especially political rights.

The military cowed the media, knocking TV and community radio stations off the air; those eventually allowed to continue were ordered to avoid politics. Print publications were instructed not to criticize the military. Doing so resulted in threats of prosecution. The generalissimo's men blocked more than 200 websites and are prosecuting online journalists.

Amnesty International noted in June: “Thai authorities continue to arbitrarily detain and imprison individuals, prevent or censor meetings and public events, and otherwise suppress peaceful dissent.” The regime has prevented around 70 public meetings, including those intending to discuss human rights violations by the junta.

The Prayuth dictatorship has arrested or detained more than 1,000 people, including student protesters, opposition politicians, independent journalists and even critical academics. Many arrested have been held incommunicado, which, warned Human Rights Watch, increases “the risk of enforced disappearance, torture, and other ill treatment.” Some 700 have been tried in military courts, noted for neither independence nor fairness.

The government banned anything seen as a political protest, including simply standing and eating. On the coup’s May 22 anniversary more than 40 protesters were arrested, one group for simply staring at a clock.

The junta has dramatically increased use of Thailand’s oppressive lese majeste laws to halt criticism in the name of “national security.” Two recent cases, involving Facebook messages, resulted in sentences of 28 and 30 years after guilty pleas.

Overall, AI warned of “an atmosphere of self-censorship and fear” compounded by legal restrictions, prosecutions, and “informal pressure and public threats by authorities, including the prime minister, against media and civil society who voice criticisms.”

Nothing will change in the future if the generalissimo and his apparatchiks have their way. The constitution proposed by a drafting committee was designed to prevent, not advance, democracy. The proposal would have immunized the junta for its crimes, fractured the popular vote, encouraged weak coalitions, provided for the possibility of an unelected prime minister, established a largely appointive Senate, used biased administrative and judicial organs to decapitate democratic movements, and allowed the armed forces to intervene in a crisis.

The government-appointed National Reform Council rejected the draft, but not because it was undemocratic. And now the junta is likely to remain in power at least until 2017 while another, no less flawed, proposal is drafted and put to a vote.

Yet further repression risks convincing Thais that violence is their only option.

The Obama administration has pressed for a return to democracy, earning criticism from the regime. Such efforts would be most effective if coordinated with like-minded Asian and European democracies. The junta obviously can ignore such foreign “interference.” But then it should be treated with the contempt it deserves.

It’s tempting not to take Thailand’s “Mr. Happy” seriously. But the longer the generalissimo and his cronies rule, the less likely Thailand is going to enjoy stable democracy.

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