

Thailand's Military Junta Destroys Democracy, Enjoys Exercising Power: Generals Postpone Elections Before Rigging Them

Doug Bandow

BANGKOK, THAILAND—Thailand's capital has lost none of its frenetic motion or relaxed informality. But it is a bit quieter of late, with last year's demonstrators dispersed by the military. However, the junta, which took power in May, is not leaving.

Next year's planned elections always were to be just a formality, since the military plans to rig the entire political system against the rural majority. But the junta recently announced that it was putting off any vote and maintaining martial law since the generals needed more time to complete their "reforms"—to cement their enduring influence.

They appear to enjoy holding political office. General turned Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha hosts a weekly television show, "Returning Happiness to the People," and wrote a song along the same theme. In his view the primary path to happiness is obeying his dictates.

The military also may worry about the future of King Bhumibol Adulyadej, aged 87 and long in ill health. Prayuth and his cronies want to be in power to manage the succession. The crown prince is less popular and reportedly has ties to former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, equally hated and feared by the commercial-military-royalist establishment which traditionally ruled Thailand.

Since seizing control the junta has urged Thailand's people to be happy at bayonet point. Most opposition leaders have adopted a patient policy of wait-and-see. But the longer the military denies any return to democracy increasing numbers of Thais will become unhappy and act on their bad feelings. Indeed, there reportedly have been contacts between Thaksin's camp and some of his fiercest critics about future cooperation.

Thailand's political crisis has been years in the making. Once an absolute monarchy, featured in famous film *The King and I*, the country's democracy has been oft interrupted by military rule—seven coups between 1945 and 1990.

A new constitution was instituted in 1997, but the business-military-court alliance hadn't prepared for telecommunications executive Thaksin Shinawatra. In 2001 he won the votes of Thailand's long neglected rural poor, giving his party a majority and making him prime minister. He spread state largesse far and wide and won again in 2005.

His frustrated opponents essentially gave up on democracy. Instead of appealing to the voters, Thailand's political losers created the so-called People's Alliance for Democracy which launched a campaign of disruptive protests against Thaksin. The military used the controversy to justify ousting the prime minister in 2006 while he was overseas. The junta then tried him in absentia for alleged corruption, keeping him abroad. The generals also rewrote the constitution to make it harder for the poor majority to control its own government.

However, the new elections gave Thaksin's successor party a plurality. The opposition, which generally dominated urban areas including Bangkok, adopted a policy of rule or ruin: If they didn't win, they would make it impossible for anyone else to govern. They styled themselves the "Yellow Shirts" after the royal color. Demonstrators took over streets, surrounded government buildings, including parliament, and swamped the international airport. Security agencies refused to protect the elected government. Courts abused the law to disqualify pro-Thaksin legislators (including one prime minister for hosting a cooking show!).

Elites which believed themselves as born to rule then pressured coalition partners to switch sides and join the misnamed Democrat Party. The latter had not won an election since 1992. So-called "Red Shirts," who backed Thaksin, traveled to Bangkok to protest the quasi-coup that made Abhisit Vejjajiva prime minister. Once in power he proved far less tolerant of street protests, as did the military, which reversed course to defend public order. Security forces retook the streets, but only after killing scores, arresting hundreds, and injuring thousands. Some protestors were armed, but most blame for the violence fell on the government. One of those responsible was Deputy Prime Minister Suthep Thaugsuban,

In Thailand's 2011 election Thaksin's sister Yingluck Shinawatra and their Pheu Thai party decisively defeated the Democrats. A new variant of the Yellow Shirts arose, with the Orwellian name People's Democratic Reform Committee and led by Suthep. He deployed mobs to prevent the government from functioning and block new elections; he threatened to kidnap the prime minister and urged the military to stage another coup. Then the Constitutional Court implemented a judicial putsch by ousting Prime Minister Yingluck on dubious grounds which would never have been applied against the opposition.

In May the army moved in, claiming the king's blessing. Again, the military's bias was clear. It would not defend the duly elected government. Instead, it acted to preclude a duly elected government. Mimicking the old Burmese junta's penchant for anodyne names, the Thai generals called themselves The National Council for Peace and Order. Emphasizing "national happiness,"

the military organized rallies featuring singing soldiers, female dancers in camo, and musicians. For the same reason, the junta forced television to broadcast the World Cup for free.

Although soldiers did not arrive with guns blazing, the coup was real. The country remains under martial law and the generals purged government of those who supported democracy. Hundreds of people were arrested. The junta immediately began detaining and threatening critics, including academics, journalists, and politicians. Many were ordered to present themselves to military officers for reprogramming, called an “attitude adjustment.” They were given “time to think” before, mostly, being freed after promising to not to resist.

Demonstrations are banned, as are public meetings of five or more people. Students who responded by reading together in groups of four also have been arrested. Political parties cannot even meet to discuss the new constitution. The junta has forced cancellation of university seminars on constitutional and political issues and banned public forums on questions as mundane as forest conservation.

The junta’s media czar, Lt. Gen. Suchai Pongput, explained: “We do not limit media freedom but freedom must be within limits.” Journalists are barred from criticizing the government; violators can be prosecuted and their publications closed. The government banned foreign channels (Fox was showing when I visited last month, but not BBC or CNN), suspended television stations and shut down community radio stations, especially in rural areas favoring Thaksin. After seizing power the junta ordered the communication ministry to “search websites with agitating content aimed at causing confusion,” that is, criticizing the regime. Prayuth warned journalists against investigating his wealth and that of his brother, another general who had done well while in the armed forces. The regime blocked online access to a critical Human Rights Watch report.

Students are detained for using the three-finger salute from the movie *Hunger Games*. (Explained a military spokesman, “If it is an obvious form of resistance, then we have to control it so it doesn’t cause any disorder in the country.”) People posting on Facebook self-portraits raising their fingers have been detained and released only after promising to cease “anti-coup activities.” Eating sandwiches in public has become an improbable opposition symbol and resulted in arrests.

Political figures have been prevented from leaving the country. Schoolbooks have been revised to airbrush out Thaksin’s name and the media has been ordered not to report on him or Yingluck. Children have been instructed to memorize Prayuth’s “12 Core Values.” Moreover, the regime issued a propaganda film shown before movies at the cinema. The video included a picture of Adolf Hitler, which the embarrassed junta promised to replace. Will Prayuth next issue his own version of Mao’s little red book of quotations?

One of the military’s most effective tools of repression is the lese majeste law, which is used to punish even innocent discussions of the monarchy. Military courts recently sentenced a radio host to five years in prison, a web editor to four and a half years, and a student to two years (for commenting on Facebook). In November the junta banned Andrew Marshall’s book, *A Kingdom in Crisis: Thailand’s Struggle for Democracy in the Twenty-First Century*,” for apparently criticizing the monarchy.

Shortly after grabbing control Prayuth said that he hoped not to violate human rights “too much.” In that he has failed dramatically. Human Rights Watch’s Brad Adams reported in November that “Respect for fundamental freedoms and democracy in Thailand under military rule has fallen into an apparently bottomless pit.” After just a short time “criticism is systematically prosecuted, political activity is banned, media is censored, and dissidents are tried in military courts.” In fact, neighboring Burma’s people now are freer than Thais. The former have an elected (though flawed) parliament, press critical of the government, right to demonstrate, opportunity to debate politics, and can make the Hunger Games salute without fear of arrest.

The junta originally promised new elections next year after the constitution was changed to create “genuine democracy”—understood to mean guaranteeing establishment rule. The generals have appointed a pliant panel to rewrite the constitution. It reportedly will recommend a largely appointed parliament, making elections essentially irrelevant.

However, the regime now expects to rule at least until 2016. Prayuth says not to worry: “Thai people, like me, have probably not been happy for nine years, but since May 22 [the date of the coup] there is happiness.”

Civilian politics may be the least of the military’s concerns. So far Thaksin and his allies have held their fire. They want to see what the junta eventually proposes. And there are rumors of back-room attempts to find a compromise. At the moment, anyway, the main opposition to Prayuth’s authoritarian rule comes from idealistic students, who can embarrass but not overthrow Thailand’s military overlords.

However, the military itself is divided, and draws many of its soldiers from areas that support Thaksin. Loyalty increasingly has replaced competence as a factor in promotion. Upon seizing power Prayuth purged the armed forces of officers thought to be insufficiently devoted to his political vision. The junta took particular care to reshuffle personnel within three divisions commonly associated with coups and incoming commanders pledged to oppose any new takeover attempts.

More threatening may be the economy. Growth is slow, with tourism and investment taking a major hit from the country’s political turmoil and now military rule. The generals have been as fiscally irresponsible as Thaksin, seeking to purchase rural citizens’ loyalty. Moreover, military ministers have little understanding of economics and leave policy to the bureaucracy, which, reports a friend of mine, has grown more arbitrary and discriminatory toward foreigners. The government sought to ease concerns that it intended to restrict foreign ownership but still talked of amending the law governing foreign investment.

Finally, a Thaksin-friendly monarch could complicate the military’s task. The widely respected king is a symbol of unity and the military routinely has attempted to avoid accountability by draping itself with his mantle. However, the 62-year-old crown prince Maha Vajiralongkorn lacks his father’s reputation and the people’s affection. He recently divorced his wife, whose family had been accused of misusing her position. Once king he may chart a new course and reportedly is friendly toward Thaksin. The likely new head of the royal Privy Council also has ties to Thaksin as well as Prayuth.

No one in Thailand's national soap opera appears innocent. Thaksin engaged in self-dealing and disdained checks and balances. His populist policies mimicked the worst spend, spend, elect, elect examples in the West. But his measures were imprudent, not "corrupt" in common understanding. Thaksin's bloody crackdown on the drug trade may have been his worst abuse.

Thaksin's opponents represent privileged elites which long used the system for their benefit and disdained democratic governance. When challenged, they responded with a strategy of rule or ruin: give us the political keys to the kingdom or we will destroy it. And they succeeded. Thaksin was an unpleasant artifact of democracy. His opponents were far more dangerous outgrowths of autocracy, hostile to the very notion that the rural poor have any role in governing themselves. Rather like Mussolini's Black Shirts, the protestors' only objective was to seize power.

The dispute remains emotional and the political gulf remains wide. But the answer will not come from Prayuth's fantasies imposed at gunpoint. Like many a general turned dictator before him, he mistakenly believes his nation's population can be ordered about as if they were soldiers. Yet his authoritarianism is leavened with an almost childish arrogance, creating a parody figure.

Some sort of grand compromise is necessary to save Thai democracy. The Thaksin family should withdraw from politics, though with an amnesty protecting him from prosecution and his wealth from seizure. Those who headed the "rule or ruin" movements against Thaksin should be barred from the public square; Suthep and others responsible for the death of protestors should be held accountable. The court and military should agree to no more partisan interventions.

Finally, the junta should allow positive constitutional reform. Central government power, especially to manipulate the economy, should be curbed, to reduce the opportunity to misuse the state to accumulate wealth and ease pressure to seize control for economic advantage. Combined with greater protection for the rule of law and property rights, this approach would encourage additional foreign investment.

The national government needs checks and balances which don't benefit only one side, in this case establishment elites. Authority also should be devolved to provinces, so national predominance by a Thaksin-like figure and party would not be so threatening to opponents. "Reds" and "Yellows" could more easily live together if they didn't have to live under each other.

If the military continues to suppress the majority's political aspirations it risks creating millions of very unhappy people who believe they have no alternative but violence. Before the coup Red Shirt leader Jatuporn Prompan warned of the possibility of "a civil war that no one wants to see." That doesn't seem in Thailand's character, but the junta's current course makes conflict of some sort much more likely.

There's not much the U.S. can do to encourage restoration of democracy in Thailand. Washington gives only a little aid, which should have been cut long ago, and stages annual military exercises in Thailand, which should be moved for the duration of the junta's rule. American officials should encourage respect for human rights, but cannot enforce those sentiments.

Ultimately Thailand's future will be decided by the Thai people. Only they can choose their own fate. Hopefully they will free themselves from the grip of childish authoritarians. Democracy rarely is an easy ride, but it remains the best path to human liberty and happiness.

Doug Bandow is a Senior Fellow at the Cato Institute.