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## Thailand's Whiny Dictator Prayuth Chan-ocha Targets Critics And Democracy

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Three years ago Thailand's military seized power. Installed as prime minister at the head of the self-proclaimed National Council for Peace and Order was Gen. Prayuth Chan-ocha, a comic figure highly sensitive to criticism and with delusions of grandeur.

He declared himself to have a "democratic heart" while arresting students for making the three-finger salute popularized in the Hunger Games movie. Last year the dictator, who after ousting the elected government composed a song on happiness for his countrymen, brought criminal charges against those who used Facebook to mock his manifold foibles. "They can't make fun of me" the very unhappy generalissimo declared. To even share or "like" a parody of the great man is deemed illegal. Such is the regime's vigilance that a 14-year-old boy was arrested in May for alleged lese majeste, a crime often charged against democracy advocates.

The generalissimo's determination to stay in power after failing to act on his promise to restore democracy is reflected in the trial of former Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra in a criminal case involving a pork barrel rice subsidy scheme she implemented after being elected prime minister in 2011. It was bad policy, not illicit corruption, and the junta's puppet legislature previously used "retrospective impeachment" to convict her of negligence and ban her from politics through 2019. However, the dictator obviously remained afraid of the populist movement created by Shinawatra's brother, Thaksin, who was elected prime minister in 2001, only to be ousted by the military in 2006.

Thaksin Shinawatra horrified the urban elite by creating an electoral majority built on strong support among the rural poor. But the military's post-coup attempt to rig the electoral process against democracy failed. Although Thaksin Shinawatra remained in exile, his party won successive elections, making Yingluck Shinawatra prime minister in 2011. But Bangkok remained an opposition bastion and her opponents turned out mobs which made the country almost ungovernable.

Opposition politicians invited a coup, but were shocked when the military refused to turn the country over to them after ousting Yingluck Shinawatra. Generalissimo Chan-ocha preached happiness while jailing his opponents, demanding "attitude adjustments" of those in custody, and employing draconian lese majeste laws against critics and their family members. Last year the junta finally held a rigged referendum on a constitution drafted to ensure continued military dominance over Thai politics. But no elections have yet to be held under that flawed document.

The prosecution of Yingluck Shinawatra over a scheme designed to help Thai farmers—the rice subsidy program was an awful waste, but traditional ruling elites objected to the beneficiaries,

not the expense—was a further attempt to drive her and her brother from politics. That she would be found guilty was never in doubt. After all, what judge would want to be summoned by “Mr. Happy” Chan-ocha’s minions for an “attitude adjustment” session?

The military apparently decided that only misuse of the criminal law, resulting in either jail or exile for the former prime minister, could break the Shinawatra family’s hold over Thai politics. The formal opposition, the misnamed Democrat Party, refused to even contest the last free election since it knew that it would lose. Generalissimo Chan-ocha similarly refuses to allow a free vote, which would sweep away his dictatorship. So he plans to deny the Thai people the opportunity to govern themselves.

One of the tragedies of the ego-driven Chan-ocha dictatorship is that it has turned the Shinawatras into symbols of democracy. A wealthy businessman, Thaksin engaged in self-dealing and conducted a “dirty war” against drug dealers, akin to Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte’s ongoing campaign. Yingluck’s premiership had few successes to its credit; the subsidy program was a major boondoggle.

But both of the Shinawatras were elected and reelected by the Thai people. And they didn’t persecute their opponents. They were poor executives, not criminal rulers, like the military juntas which ousted both Shinawatras.

The latest State Department human rights report ran 62 pages. It cited “decrees limiting civil liberties, including restrictions on freedoms of speech, assembly, and the press.” Other problems included “arbitrary arrests and detention” and “excessive use of force by government security forces, including harassing or abusing criminal suspects, detainees, and prisoners.” Finally, of course, “citizens no longer had the ability to choose their government through free and fair elections.”

Earlier this year the International Federation for Human Rights published a detailed study entitled: “Under Siege: Violations of Civil and Political Rights under Thailand’s Military Junta.” The group cited “rampant” arrests, unlawful punishments, poor prison conditions, travel restrictions, civilian trials before military courts, restrictions on freedom of expression and opinion, increased lese majeste prosecutions, charges against critics, limits on academic freedom, media censorship, protest bans, and the flawed constitutional referendum. That’s quite a bill of particulars.

In reviewing the events of last year Human Rights Watch criticized the junta’s failure to fulfill its promises “to respect human rights and restore democratic rule. A new constitution, which will entrench unaccountable and abusive military power, was adopted in a referendum marked by repressive tactics against critics of the proposed constitution.” Government censorship, arbitrary detention, and lack of accountability continued. Indeed, HRW’s Asia director, Brad Adams, noted that the military was moving backward, and had “increasingly persecuted critics and dissenters, banned peaceful protests, censored the media, and suppressed speech in the press and online.”

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Amnesty International reached similar conclusions on Thailand. Stated AI: “The military authorities further restricted human rights. Peaceful political dissent, whether through speech or protests, and acts perceived as critical of the monarchy were punished or banned. Politicians, activists and human rights defenders faced criminal investigations and prosecutions for, among other things, campaigning against a proposed constitution and reporting on state abuses. Many civilians were tried in military courts. Torture and other ill-treatment was widespread. Community land rights activists faced arrest, prosecution and violence for opposing development projects and advocating for the rights of communities.”

Thailand was investigated by the UN’s Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances. Two years ago the body listed 90 unresolved cases in Thailand. Unsurprisingly, the junta refused to permit investigators to visit despite the Working Group’s request and “reminders sent.” Amnesty International observed: “Human rights researchers have also been investigated for their work on rights violations, lawyers for defending their clients, land rights activists for supporting communities at risk, journalists for reporting on sensitive topics, and academics for expressing opinions on academic freedom.” In charging human rights attorneys with sedition the junta mimicked China’s Communist Party.

The regime defended its human rights record before the United Nations: mass repression and imprisonment “do not impinge on general freedom of expression—which we believe to be fundamental element of a democratic society—as long as such expression does not undermine public order and social harmony.” The junta members, led by the generalissimo, may actually believe that arresting critics is consistent with true freedom of expression, but that suggests a more intractable problem.

The blog “Political Prisoners in Thailand” commented last year: “Thailand’s human rights are not just trampled upon by the military and their boots, but are simply outside the mindset of the military junta and its leaders. They do not neglect or infringe on human rights but do not comprehend the idea of human rights. Every action by this censorious and thuggish regime speaks to their incapacity to comprehend notions of universal rights such as freedom of expression. The military in Thailand maintains torture, enforced disappearance and murder with impunity.”

Overall, Freedom House judged Thailand to be “Not Free.” Observed the group, “As the military junta goes about remaking the political system, it has exercised unchecked powers granted through an article of the interim constitution to impose extensive restrictions on civil and political rights, and to suppress dissent.”

Nothing will change even if the junta finally holds the long-promised election, now officially planned for next year. Irrespective of the outcome of any vote, the military will rule while continuing to suppress dissent and punish criticism.

Alas, none of this appears to bother the Trump administration.

Earlier this year the Trump administration followed its policy of accommodating dictators and invited Generalissimo Chan-ocha to visit, though his trip was postponed after being initially planned for July. The regime was ecstatic about the invitation. Kasit Piromya, a functionary in the handpicked “National Reform Steering Assembly,” said the visit would provide the junta with “respectability and legitimacy.” Moreover, the U.S. Ambassador to Thailand, Glyn Davies,

turned conciliatory after the Obama years, spoke of the need for reconciliation and Washington's desire to "continue to evolve the relationship, to grow the relationship, to deepen it."

However, the State Department's recent unexpected cut in aid to Egypt because of that military regime's failure to respect human rights suggests that Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, at least, remains committed to democracy. He should similarly punish the Thai junta for its failure to respect individual liberties and promote genuine democracy. Although Washington must work with Thailand's government, even if a military dictatorship, the Trump administration should not give the generalissimo "respectability and legitimacy."

Especially after the latest travesty of justice. Yingluck Shinawatra joined her brother in exile before the court delivered the junta's verdict. Such a political trial, with a predetermined outcome, makes a mockery of the rule of law, which is far more serious than denigrating "Mr. Happy" Chan-ocha's personal dignity. The Trump administration should stand on the side of liberty and refuse to condone tyranny in Thailand.

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