



## Thailand's junta uses courts

Doug Bandow

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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.

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.

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. She fled abroad ahead of almost certain conviction.

It was bad policy, not illicit corruption. But the junta obviously remains 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.

Although Thaksin Shinawatra remained in exile, his party won successive elections, making Yingluck Shinawatra prime minister in 2011. However, Bangkok remained an opposition bastion and her opponents turned out mobs which made the country almost ungovernable.

After the coup 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.

The prosecution of Yingluck Shinawatra over a scheme designed to help Thai farmers is a further attempt to drive her and her brother from politics. 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.

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.

But both of the Shinawatras were elected and reelected by the Thai people. And they didn't persecute their opponents.

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." 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."

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.

Overall, Freedom House judged Thailand to be "Not Free." 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. Kasit Piromya, a functionary in the handpicked "National Reform Steering Assembly," said the visit would provide the junta with "respectability and legitimacy."

However, the State Department's 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.

Especially after the trial of Yingluck Shinawatra. Such a political trial makes a mockery of the rule of law, which is far more serious than denigrating "Mr. Happy" Chan-ocha's personal dignity. The U.S. and Bangkok's democratic neighbors should stand on the side of liberty and refuse to condone tyranny in Thailand.

*Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute and a former special assistant to President Ronald Reagan. He is the author of "Foreign Follies: America's New Global Empire."*