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Military Junta Turns Thailand into Land of Frowns

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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 recent bombing of a popular Hindu shrine in Bangkok should act as the famed fire bell in the night: if terrorism becomes a tactic by the disaffected life in Thailand could generate far more frowns than smiles.

In May 2014 General Prayuth Chan-ocha seized power. He claimed to have "a democratic heart," and his junta promised happiness, prosperity, and security. But the regime has failed on all three counts. Those denied political rights and civil liberties, and especially those arrested and jailed, obviously aren't happy. Only those now ruling, or with friends among those ruling, have reason to smile.

The generals also found that economic forces do not yield to military dictates. Growth has slowed and forecasts for the future have fallen. A recent analysis called the country's economic outlook "fragile with risks skewed to the downside." Poor economic performance led to a cabinet reshuffle, with two new generals added. A government spokesman declared: "We can say the challenges we faced are bigger than all previous governments." Military rule only makes it worse.

Security is a traditional responsibility of the military, but the response of the authorities to the recent Bangkok bombings has not been reassuring. With the investigation yielding few answers, officials advanced and dropped various theories before threatening anyone circulating "false information" and causing "public confusion and fear." General-Prime Minister Prayuth suggested that the police watch the New York police drama "Blue Bloods" for help: "They will get tips, ideas and insights into their case." (Maybe investigators should study "CSI" and "Law and Order" as well.) After making one arrest, without naming or charging the suspect, the police claimed \$84,000 in reward money for themselves.

The regime may use the bombing as an excuse not only to punish its critics, but also to extend military rule. General Prayuth originally explained his seizure of power as necessary "in order for the country to return to normal quickly," with new elections to be held within 15 months-- which would have been last month. Then the junta shifted the date to February 2016. Now 2017 is more likely. However, the military might hang onto power until it can manage the expected royal transition from the revered, but aged and ill, king to the healthier but less respected crown prince.

Generalissimo Prayuth's rule has been bizarre from the start. The regime claimed the result of seizing power was neither coup nor junta. The regime followed George Orwell in creating the National Council for Peace and Order. Years ago the neighboring Burmese junta called itself the similarly misleading State Peace and Development Council (SPDC).

Despite General-Prime Minister Prayuth's claim to support democracy, in March he declared: "Our country has seen so much trouble because we have had too much democracy." In fact, he betrays a touch of comic megalomania. The newly minted dictator declared that happiness had returned to Thailand. He penned a song for the people's edification and appears weekly in a self-absorbed TV show which all stations are forced to carry.

He believes he should be beyond criticism. Last week he ranted against those who urged rejection of the draft constitution, written to keep the military and its allies in power. Legislators ousted by the junta had "no right" to comment. "These people, now that they are being harsh to me, I will have to be harsh in return," the disgruntled dictator declared. While he said he wouldn't ban them from speaking, "when the time comes, I will deal with them."

Last December he complained that newspapers "made me lose my manners and have ruined my leader image." He added: "I will shut them down for real. I cannot allow them to continue their disrespect. Otherwise, what's the point of me being" prime minister and declaring martial law? Irritated with a journalist's question, he stated: "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. "Shut-Up-Or-Else" often has surrendered to his inner autocrat.

Freedom House reported that the coup pushed Thailand backwards from "partly free" to "not free," with a reduction in civil liberties and especially political rights. Human Rights Watch observed: "One year after seizing power, Thailand's military junta has used dictatorial power to systematically repress human rights throughout the country. The regime has "prosecuted critics of military rule, banned political activity, censored the media, and tried dissidents in unfair military courts." While the Thai military has not been as brutal as its Burmese counterpart, today people in Burma arguably are freer than those in Thailand. A parliamentary election is scheduled for November and there are fewer restrictions on speech and the press in Burma.

For almost a year Generalissimo Prayuth ruled through martial law. On April 1 the junta replaced martial law with equally repressive measures under the interim constitution, drafted by the military for the military. The regime declared that whatever it does is "completely legal and constitutional." 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 military quickly 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, including the Human Rights Watch page for Thailand. In August the regime indicted a critic for allegedly spreading false information about General-Prime Minister Prayuth on the internet.

The government is prosecuting two online journalists for criminal libel (defamation) for detailing military involvement in human smuggling. A group of human rights organizations warned that "the use of the Computer Crime Act in this case is also particularly troubling, especially since this appears to be the first time that one of the services of the Thai armed forces has ever used the CCA against journalists." The trial court dismissed reliance on the CCA against the two, but the military said it may appeal.

Public meetings require government consent, which typically is not granted to critics. The regime has prevented around 70 public meetings, including academic events, involving political issues. For instance, the Thai Lawyers for Human Rights planned a meeting to release its report on human rights violations by the junta, but the military banned the event as "likely to cause disturbance."

Since taking control the Prayuth dictatorship has arrested or detained more than 1,000 people, including student protestors, opposition politicians, independent journalists, and even critical academics. Many were summoned for "attitude adjustment" through TV or radio announcements; failing to respond risked prosecution, causing some of those targeted to go into exile. The last elected prime minister was charged with criminal negligence for what most democracies recognize as typical pork barrel politics.

Many arrested have been held incommunicado, which, warned HRW, increases "the risk of enforced disappearance, torture, and other ill treatment." Indeed, there have been scores of credible claims of torture, but human rights activists reporting on those cases have been punished.

Thais released, noted AI, continue "to be subjected to conditions imposed on them upon release, including restrictions on their rights to freedom of peaceful assembly, expression and movement. They will face prosecution should they breach the conditions." Some 700 have been tried in military courts, noted for neither independence nor fairness. This process continues, observed Amnesty: "for acts that have been criminalized in violation of Thailand's human rights obligations, including participation in peaceful gatherings and carrying out other peaceful acts of expression."

The government banned anything seen as a political protest. Public gatherings of five or more are prohibited, but when people meet in smaller groups in protest they also face arrest. Thais have been detained for standing, eating, wearing black on the king's birthday, playing the French (revolutionary) national anthem "La Marseillaise," applying duct tape to their mouths, making the Hunger Games three-finger salute, reading George Orwell's 1984 in public, wearing t-shirts with political slogans and messages seen as political, holding blank paper, displaying papers and placards with anti-coup messages, selling products with former prime minister Shinawatra Thaksin's face, talking to journalists, aiding arrested protestors, and distributing a poem on democracy.

Students usually take the lead in the few demonstrations which still occur. On the coup's May 22 anniversary more than 40 protestors were arrested. One group went to Bangkok's Arts and Cultural Centre and stood staring at a clock. For this act 20 people were arrested and roughly treated--one ended up with a dislocated cornea, another with a damaged spine. Three other activists were detained for planning to file a criminal complaint against the generals for staging

the coup. Protests elsewhere resulted in additional arrests. All face prosecution for illegal assembly, with potential sentences up to seven years in prison.

The generalissimo and his cronies ordered university staff to prevent any political activity on campus. Much like the Egyptian military dictatorship, the regime instructed college administrators and education bureaucrats to monitor and restrict student protests.

The junta has dramatically increased use of Thailand's oppressive lese-majeste laws. The military is employing these abusive measures to halt even modest criticism in the name of "national security." Freedom House explained: "The charges have been used to target activists, scholars, students, journalists, foreign authors, and politicians." There were only two pending prosecutions when the military took control; now there are at least 56 cases. Moreover, lese-majeste prosecutions are being tried in closed door military courts, with the verdict preordained. 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." Private violence backs the junta. Warned FH: "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."

Nothing will change in the future if the generalissimo and his apparatchiks have their way. For years a business-royalist-military-bureaucratic elite controlled Thai politics, putting its interests before that of the rural poor, who were expected to accept their unfortunate lot in life. That changed with the 2001 election of Thaksin (as he is commonly known), shocking members of a ruling class who forthrightly insisted on their right to hold the majority in political bondage.

There is much to criticize in his rule, from self-dealing to abusive-policing, but his opponents were most angered by the fact that they no longer ruled. Thaksin's success triggered an extended, sometimes violent political struggle highlighted by two coups, the first in 2006. Then the military's rewrite of the constitution failed to prevent his allies from again taking power. Obviously the generalissimo doesn't want a repeat performance.

Reducing state power and decentralizing government authority would be the strategy most likely to enable antagonistic Thai factions to live together in relative political peace. But that path never was considered by the generalissimo and his cronies. The regime established three military-appointed bodies to make laws and draft a new constitution: National Legislative Assembly, National Reform Council, and Constitution Drafting Committee. The proposed constitution, submitted by the CDC to the NRC, is designed to prevent, not advance, democracy. Explained Pavin Chachavalpongpun of Japan's Kyoto University: "The military is now trying to put in place an infrastructure through constitutional drafting to ensure that even when it is forced out of power, it could continue to control Thai politics."

Niran Pitakwatchare, a member of the National Human Rights Commission, complained that "This charter draft is a step back from empowering the people because it gives the state a firmer grip and deprives people of the rights they earlier enjoyed." Even some of the politicians who

once hoped to benefit from military intervention oppose the draft constitution. Nipit Intarasombat, deputy leader of the anti-Thaksin Democrat Party, warned that the document would "give unlimited power to that government."

The proposal immunized the junta for all crimes committed. Elections would be orchestrated to fracture votes and encourage coalitions over single party government. The draft provided for the possibility of an unelected prime minister. There would be a largely appointive Senate. Technically non-partisan but overtly biased administrative and judicial organs, such as the Anti-Corruption Commission and Constitutional Court, would continue their role to destroy democratic movements such as Thaksin's. The military would dominate the new National Strategic Reform and Reconciliation Committee, which would allow the armed forces to intervene in a crisis.

The military's readiness to manipulate the system is evident from its unwillingness to provide justice for the bloodshed of 2010. Noted HRW, after seizing power the junta expedited action against Thaksin supporters accused of violence. In contrast, "despite clear photographic and other evidence, only a handful of violent crimes committed by" the military have been investigated. Generalissimo Prayuth appears determined to transform Thailand into what once was said of Prussia--an army possessing a state rather than a state possessing an army.

The NRC rejected the proposed constitution, though not because it was undemocratic, and the people can vote down any new draft in a referendum. But now the military remains in charge and will appoint another panel to draft another constitution, which likely will be no better than the one rejected. This rigged process could go on for years, prolonging military rule.

Yet further repression would sap the junta's already weakened legitimacy. Worse, it would encourage violent resistance. After all, by insisting that he cannot be criticized, held accountable, or removed by the people, Generalissimo Prayuth risks convincing Thais that violence is their only option. It is an alarming prospect for a country surrounded by countries which have been overwhelmed by conflict.

After the coup the U.S. blocked some aid, disinvited Bangkok from maritime maneuvers, and scaled back the annual "Cobra Gold" exercise. The Obama administration also publicly urged a return to democracy, earning criticism from the regime for having "negatively affected the reputation of the country." But newly confirmed ambassador Glyn Davies, previously responsible for North Korea, is expected to reaffirm Washington's support for liberty. Such efforts would be most effective if coordinated with likeminded Asian and European democracies. The generalissimo and his supporters obviously can ignore such foreign "interference." But then they should be treated with the contempt they deserve.

Former U.S. defense attaché Desmond Walton warned that criticism "threatens to undermine one of the Obama administration's signature foreign-policy initiatives, the rebalance to the Asia-Pacific." In particular, he worried that Thailand "offers U.S. forces the only reliable access point to mainland Asia." However, rising Asian powers should take the lead in balancing against China. The U.S. has no reason to get involved in a conflict on the Asian mainland. Moreover, Bangkok is not likely to follow Burma's mistake in becoming a veritable satellite of China, which encouraged the Burmese military to finally reverse course and open to the West. Anyway, an unpopular junta run by an unstable general is a dubious pillar for U.S. security policy.

It's tempting not to take Thailand's blustering generalissimo seriously. Noted John Sifton of Human Rights Watch: "Prayuth seems genuinely flabbergasted by his critics. To hear him tell it, the junta has not seized power, don't want power, haven't exercised power, and don't understand why anyone fails to understand their motives and explanations in not seizing power and not wanting it while holding it all the same. It really is like Alice in Wonderland."

Unfortunately, in the Thai version the slightly mad Queen of Hearts not only bosses people around but jails them. So far no one has lost his head, but if opposition rises, and especially if it grows violent, that might change. The longer the generals and their cronies rule, the less likely Thailand is going to enjoy stable democracy.

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