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Fear Rules the Junta in Thailand

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Aigh

With the draft constitution rejected, military rule likely for an unknown period

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With the dust settling a week after the Thai junta's handpicked parliament unexpectedly binned the draft constitution that had been under construction for months, what seemed to have motivated the refusal was fear. The practical effect is the possibility of democratic elections has receded far into the future

With the proposed charter generating criticism from both the junta's supporters and opponents, it was clear that a self-imposed constitutional referendum tentatively set for around the first of the year, could damage the junta if the constitution was rejected, as seemed likely. This is why all but three of 30 generals on the National Reform Council voted on Sept. 6 to reject the draft, with the media speculating that these military representatives were ordered to vote it down. Even in the unlikely event that the charter got beyond the referendum, the generals were apprehensive that the Bangkok elites and the royalists were still unpopular enough that promised elections might once again produce an unwelcome outcome.

The discarded charter was designed to serve the military junta's concerns about political order and control. Despite some language suggestive of liberal proclivities, the main elements of the draft were conservative, unrepresentative and undemocratic.

Observers have suggested several reasons for a draft charter put together by the servants of the junta, in the interests of the junta and its supporters, and reflecting the political desires of many conservatives was ditched. Some speculated that the whole exercise was a sham from the start, and was a cover for the junta's desire to hang on to power. There was also talk of splits in the broader royalist elite while those who focus on the monarchy concluded that the

Junta still has succession jitters and worries that it must be in power when the aged and ill king passes away.

Each of these suggestions carries some weight when it is considered that the next draft and the elections promised by the junta are probably another two years away. On that timeline, the junta will have been in power for at least three years and four months before an election is held.

For army chief-turned-Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha and the generals of his cabinet, the fears about a vote, especially in the northeastern region that still retains loyalty to long-ousted former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, the possibility of an unwelcome outcome clearly told them that the country has not seen sufficient “reform” for elections to reject the surrogate political parties associated with the exiled former premier.

“Reform” for the junta has been defined as uprooting the so-called Thaksin regime. This has involved the junta seeking to so neuter political parties that even an election victory would not permit any tinkering with the rule of the royalist elite, supported by the military. That was the task of the charter drafters. More significantly, “reform” involved disassembling and weakening the broad red shirt movement that had backed Thaksin. It also meant a thoroughgoing purge of those considered associated with Thaksin in the military and bureaucracy, replacing them with royalists. Important institutions from the Constitutional Court to university administrations have been repopulated by loyalists. While all this was going on all anti-coup activism had to be repressed.

Despite unceasing repression and censorship, the junta apparently came to the view that opposition to the charter meant that it needs to do a lot more to guarantee its version of Thailand’s political future is in place. Since the May 22, 2014 coup, with hundreds having been detained for periods of “re-education,” dozens of political opponents have fled overseas, and the draconian lese majeste law has been used aggressively with record length of prison sentences. But this has been insufficient.

Sporadic anti-coup activism has continued and the erratic and prickly Prayuth has shown considerable frustration and anger that he is opposed. His outbursts against Thaksin and his supporters, the media and anyone who criticises his regime are evidence of his fear that the future is not secured.

In the week since the charter was dropped, the junta’s fears and motivations have become clear.

Prayuth has declared that he will escalate measures against opponents. Two senior pro-Thaksin figures and former ministers have been detained. Pheu Thai Party’s Pichai Naripatapan has been taken into indefinite military detention and Karun Hosakul is being held by the military for at least a week. Both have been critical of the junta and are said to require “attitude adjustment.” According to Prayuth, Pichai must “confess” to his political misbehavior and will not be released until he is “cooperative.” The general has declared: “You cannot oppose me.”

A new attempt to craft a conservative charter is getting underway, with Prayuth seeking to recruit an old guard of military loyalists and royalists for the task, with 77 year-old legal expert Meechai Ruchapan being invited to lead a new charter-drafting body.

Meechai and many of the other figures being mentioned as likely to assist him have long histories of serving military governments following the coups of 1991, 2006 and 2014. In recent years, most have been associated with the right-wing and anti-Thaksin movements that have sought to bring down elected governments.

Such a deeply reactionary team and the expanding repression of all opposition confirms that the ruling junta considers that there is still more work to do before the people can be allowed to cast votes. While the military and police can repress opponents, Meechai will be tasked with concocting a set of political rules that will surely result in elections being a political sideshow.

Prayuth and his supporters are clear that the military government must stay in power for as long as it takes to complete this “national reform” that seeks to so entrench authoritarianism in law, education and society that democracy will be off the agenda for years to come.

His strategy is thus not without risk. What Prayuth ignores is that this use of blunt and brutish

repression and the military's determination to stay in power has, in the past, resulted in popular revolts. Prayuth may well bring his own downfall through his determination to "refr

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