ON 22 JULY 2014, two months after a military coup d'état, the Thai military promulgated an interim constitution signed by King Bhumibol Adulyadej. With sweeping powers in the hands of General Prayuth Chan-ocha, the chairman of the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO), the interim constitution’s preamble promises to eradicate corruption and bring ‘reform’ and subsequently ‘genuine democracy’ to Thai society. The NCPO promises its military and middle-class supporters that it would put an end to corrupt politics in all forms. However, with a narrow focus on the corruption of politicians, the question remains whether the interim charter is able to bring genuine democracy, stability, and ‘happiness’ to a deeply polarized society.

Section 44 of the interim constitution, for example, provides PM Prayuth with extensive powers. They include the authority to issue orders and undertake whatever the NCPO deems necessary regardless of the years of Thaksin’s administrations. These orders, “for the benefit of reform in any field and to strengthen public unity and harmony, or for the prevention, disruption or suppression of any action which undermines public peace and order or national security, the Monarchy, national economies or administration of State affairs, whether that act emerges inside or outside the kingdom.” The constitution guarantees that PM Prayuth’s orders are “legal, constitutional and conclusive”, thus rendering check-and-balance mechanisms unnecessary.

The NCPO’s far-reaching powers have, inevitably, led to allegations of human rights violations. By the end of July 2014, the NCPO had summoned 565 individuals and arrested 233. These include human rights defenders, academics, activists, journalists, students, writers, and protesters. Meanwhile the NCPO banned public gatherings, enforced stringent censorship on individuals, groups, and the mass media, issued repressive orders, revoked the passports of those who refused to report to the junta and who had fled abroad instead. Those who face charges will be tried in the military court. The interim constitution also declares the NCPO’s use of power to be within the law and, at the same time, renders this illegality illegible.

The interim constitution also signals resistance to politicians and electoral politics. It barred individuals who have been members of political parties under three years prior to the date of appointment from becoming cabinet members of the coup-installed government (Section 20); members of National Legislative Assembly (Section 8); and members of the Constitution Drafting Committee (Section 33). Meanwhile, it channels political power to NCPO members, military personnel and government officials. In this context, Thailand may be argued to have returned to a ‘bureaucratic polity’, where the military, bureaucrats and business interests gain control over elected representatives. This negativity towards political and electoral politics is also broadly found among the urban middle class. Disturbing of politicians has grown steadily since the early 1980s when participatory politics and electoral government began to entrench itself in the political system.

One of the key reasons for the distrust of participatory politics and electoral government is the belief that rural and poor voters, who form Thaksin’s mass support, will sell their votes in exchange for short-term personal benefit or petty cash. The urban rich, on the other hand, blame rural voters for lack of good education and ‘proper’ understanding of democracy for the failure of Thai democracy. Many intellectuals and civic groups argue that holding elections does not necessarily mean adherence to democratic principles, and thus seek to undermine the legitimacy of electoral politics and the principle of one-man-one-vote.

However, recent research has shown that vote-buying is no longer a decisive factor in determining election outcome. Instead the poor and rural voters are increasingly motivated by community development projects but this has been interpreted by others as being bribed by unsustainable populist policies. In addition, the urban middle-class believe that populist policies will cause long-term damage to the Thai economy. Ironically, they fail to see how multi-billion baht projects catering to the interest of urbanites and industrialists have been contributing to uneven development and constitute exploitation of taxpayers. For many of these urbanites, a desirable political system does not have to be the same as a western-style democracy with respect to freedom, liberties and equality of every citizen. They argue that it must be clean from corrupt politicians and, hence, be ruled by moral people.

As a result, antipty for corrupt politicians, and a bias against political elections and rural development policies will be registered in the new constitution that the military-appointed Constitution Drafting Committee is drafting. Many Thai conservatives believe that the most efficient way towards a happy and peaceful society is to programme people with similar beliefs, and to view diverse opinions, demands and interests as divisive and destructive. Initially, the authorities tried to block Facebook and also called for meetings with representatives from Facebook and Twitter. These were unsuccessful but the junta let it be known that those posting anti-coup comments on social media will be tracked.

Finally, the clampdown on dissent has been extraordinary. Martial law has enabled the government to ban, throughout the country, any protest gathering of more than five people. The authorities exercise control and censorship, or the threat of censorship, over newspapers and television channels, while some newspapers, radio stations, and television channels have been closed down. Initially, the authorities tried to block Facebook and also called for meetings with representatives from Facebook and Twitter. These were unsuccessful but the junta let it be known that those posting anti-coup comments on social media will be tracked.

Some websites, such as Human Rights Watch, are blocked. A well-publicized instance of the junta’s sensitivity to content was the recent last-minute cancellation of an event organized by Amnesty International and other groups at the Foreign Correspondents Club in Bangkok in September 2014. The junta has also summoned a number of people, most of them former politicians and activists, for questioning and warnings. The current number is estimated at well over 600, and some of them have been detained for up to a week.

In conclusion, the politics created by the present government marks a very fundamental departure from Thaksin’s politics. However, in doing so, the NCPO government is also hastening the end of the traditional bureaucratic polity, the demise of the Thaksin politically based, prime-minister-led politics, and perhaps the reduction in the influence of the network monarch.

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The Network: ‘Society In Transition’

ISETA, Singapore, 27 and 28 July 2015

ISEAS will be holding the Thailand Forum on 27-28 July this year. The overarching theme of the Forum will be ‘society in transition’ and its focus will be on developments in politics, society, culture and the economy. These developments will be examined from both a short and long-term perspective.

Papers treating recent political developments will address those developments from an explicitly long-term perspective. Scholars will be invited to think about transitional processes in these areas and the deep structural changes that are currently playing out. The Forum will describe the tension between the old and the new, and to consider the ways in which such transitions will unfold in the near future.

The aim of the Forum is to take stock of Thailand’s current problems and prospects and to alert stakeholders and interested parties to issues and areas likely to merit attention in the years ahead. This Forum will be of interest to students and academics, policymakers and business people.

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