

“Tanks and flowers” coup turns repressive

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Thailand’s September 19 “tanks and flowers” coup quickly turned nasty, as a military junta imposed media censorship, banned political gatherings of more than five people and prohibited the formation of political parties.

The crackdown is ostensibly aimed at supporters of ousted Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, the billionaire and right-wing populist who was ousted in a bloodless takeover by the armed forces. The junta — the latest in a series of military governments in Thailand’s history — took power while Thaksin was in New York at the opening session of the United Nations General Assembly.

The coup has the backing of King Bhumibol Adulyadej, reflecting a shift in the Thai ruling class away from Thaksin, who was the target of mass anti-corruption, pro-democracy protests in March.

But far from “restoring” the democratic institutions hollowed out by Thaksin, the military is out to reshape the Thai political system to suit itself and its allies in the business community and the government bureaucracy.

Some analysts argue that the coup was also triggered by the military chiefs’ reluctance to continue Thaksin’s hardline war against Islamist groups in the mostly Muslim south of the country, which has taken 1000 lives since 2003. Another 2000 people have been killed by government forces in a “war on drugs”.

So far, though, conciliation doesn’t appear to be the intent of the junta, which is led by General Sonthi Boonyaratglin. Early on, coup leaders authorised Thailand’s communications ministry to “control, block and destroy” all media coverage that might undermine “political reform under a democratic system”, the *Thai News Service* reported.

The media had already been censored unofficially for years. The main broadcasting outlets are controlled by the government or owned by Thaksin’s family and allies in his party, Thais Love Thais (known by the initials TRT). Thaksin’s increasingly authoritarian drift, along with allegations of corruption, led to the mass protests earlier this year.

The demonstrations in Bangkok brought together the urban middle class, college students, non-governmental organisations and sections of organised labour. They were implicitly backed by King Bhumibol, who was increasingly resentful of Thaksin’s violations of royal prerogatives, and sections of Thai business alienated from Thaksin’s “CEO” government. Key figures in the military brass were also upset by Thaksin’s promotion of friends and family to top positions. But Thaksin outmanoeuvred his opponents by calling a snap election in April. As in his earlier election victories in 2001 and 2005, Thaksin’s win was secured with a big rural vote amid a weak opposition boycott.

After winning the vote — which was later found to have been unconstitutional — Thaksin resigned as prime minister, but remained on in the post as a caretaker until elections could be held. The likelihood that Thaksin would have prevailed in yet another vote spurred the military to do what a

weak opposition could not — force him out.

The reason for Thaksin's electoral success was populist measures like universal government health-care subsidies and a debt moratorium aimed at Thailand's approximately 60% rural population. These measures were extremely popular, especially in the wake of the suffering of the poor during the 1997 Asian economic crisis.

Meanwhile, Thaksin literally put private business in control of the country. "This antidemocratic stance and shrinking of the public sphere align with the wish of big business to use state power to pursue growth and profits free of the complications of opposition or criticism", wrote Pasuk Phongpaichit, a leading Thai academic and co-author of a book on Thaksin. "Thailand's major ally, the United States, says or does little to object to any of this."

By the time the military intervened, Thaksin was apparently laying the groundwork for a possible coup of his own by accelerating the promotion of relatives and allies in the military. His rivals acted first.

Meanwhile, the king, whose authority is closely tied to the majority Buddhist religion, is operating behind the scenes to restore his political authority via an alliance with the military, a setup that was dominant during the Cold War, when Thailand was a US bulwark against Chinese and Russian influence in South-East Asia.

All this took place over the heads of the hundreds of thousands who participated in the pro-democracy movement in April.

Since taking power, the military has sought to use the protests' "people power" imagery, ordering soldiers to smile and pose for pictures with civilians and tourists. Bangkok's middle class seemed to welcome the coup, and business will certainly fall in line. The US, while formally opposing the coup, hasn't called for Thaksin's return to power.

Still, the coup is likely to be challenged. Already, some small left-wing groups have defied the ban on protests, and the rural population will be determined to keep their economic gains made under Thaksin. Thailand's political crisis may still be in the early stages.

P.S.

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