

Gen. Prayut Chan-ocha in Britain and France: No red carpet for Thai junta leader, Mrs May

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As Theresa May welcomes the Thai Prime Minister to Number 10 today, does she care about democracy and human rights? Or are business deals the only real priority?

Thailand's Prime Minister Gen. Prayut Chan-ocha is meeting UK Prime Minister Theresa May in London this afternoon (June 20), and is scheduled to meet French President Emmanuel Macron in Paris five days later. Human rights concerns need to be at the top of the agenda.

May and Macron should be prepared to give General Prayut an earful about Thailand's abysmal human rights record and why his dawdling on restoring civilian democratic rule is damaging Thailand's reputation and hurting Thai people.

The United Kingdom and France are long-time allies of Thailand who have repeatedly stated that bilateral relations will only be normalized when democracy is fully restored through a free and fair election.

Yet four years after the May 2014 coup, Thailand is nowhere close to meeting General Prayut's pledge to quickly restore civilian democratic rule.

Instead, the military junta has been trying to masquerade as a kinder, gentler quasi-democracy. That argument has fallen flat in Thailand, and European leaders should not fall for it either.

Since the coup, General Prayut has wielded unchecked power with total impunity. The ruling National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) has routinely enforced censorship and blocked public discussions about the state of human rights and democracy in Thailand. Hundreds of pro-democracy activists and dissidents have been prosecuted on criminal charges such as sedition, computer-related crimes, and lese majeste (insulting the monarchy) for the peaceful expression of their opinions.

Public gatherings of more than five people and peaceful political activities are prohibited. Thousands have been summoned to have their political attitudes "adjusted" by the military and pressured to stop making critical comments against the junta. Military authorities continue to secretly detain people for up to seven days without charge and interrogate them without access to lawyers or safeguards against mistreatment. Government agencies have frequently retaliated against individuals who report allegations of abuses by filing spurious criminal charges against them.

The junta has repeatedly made—then broken—promises about the election date and a return to civilian rule. The NCPO's latest promise is to hold an election by February 2019, but there is little reason to believe that, if held, the election will be either free or fair. Ongoing repression means that voters, political parties, and the media in Thailand will have their arms twisted and their mouths gagged in the lead-up to the election.

Unfortunately, May and Macron seem intent on making business deals a priority at the expense of serious discussions of Thailand's human rights record. What they should recognize is that the United Kingdom and France stand to benefit far more from a partnership with a country that respects human rights and rule of law.

The United Kingdom and France should base their relationship with Thailand on principles of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. That means pressing for an end to Thailand's persecution of dissidents, lifting restrictions on fundamental freedoms, and undertaking genuine, rights-respecting reforms.

General Prayut should return to Bangkok after these visits with a clear understanding that Thailand's human rights problems are a top priority for London and Paris. Otherwise the junta will continue to believe that it can continue rampant abuses without detriment to Thailand's international standing.

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* Open Democracy. 20 June 2018:

<https://www.opendemocracy.net/uk/sunai-phasuk/no-red-carpet-for-thai-junta-leader-mrs-may>