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Thailand: Unending Repression 6 Months Post-Coup ^[1]

‘Don’t Ask for Democracy’ Junta Leader Says

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(New York) – Thailand’s military government is severely repressing fundamental rights and freedoms six months after its May 22, 2014 coup. The ruling National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) has shown no genuine signs of restoring democratic civilian rule.

“Respect for fundamental freedoms and democracy in Thailand under military rule has fallen into an apparently bottomless pit,” said [Brad Adams](#), ^[2] Asia director at Human Rights Watch. “Six months after the coup, criticism is systematically prosecuted, political activity is banned, media is censored, and dissidents are tried in military courts.”

Protesters who express disagreement with the junta—such as by showing the three-finger salute used in “The Hunger Games” movies as an act of defiance, putting duct tape or a hand over their mouths in public or in photos posted on Facebook—face a possible two-year prison term. Coup leader Gen. Prayuth Chan-ocha, now prime minister and NCPO chairman, announced on November 17 that criticizing or obstructing him, the government, or the NCPO was unacceptable. He also undermined his claims about a road map to return to civilian democratic rule through free and credible elections, saying on November 21: “Don’t ask me to give you democracy and elections. This is not the right time.” Prayuth then added that the enforcement of martial law would continue “as long as necessary.”

The junta’s intolerance was exemplified on November 19 in northeastern Khon Kaen province when military authorities arrested five university students for standing up during a speech by Prayuth and revealing t-shirts emblazoned with “Don’t Want a Coup” in Thai. They then raised their hands to give the three-fingered salute, a symbol of resistance in [Thailand](#) ^[3] since the coup. Shortly after the students were taken away to a nearby military camp, Prayuth announced, “Anyone else want to protest?” During interrogations, military authorities threatened the students with a military court trial for violating martial law and expulsion from their state-run university. However, after a public outcry, the five students were released without charge on November 20.

Two days later, another student was arrested for showing the three-finger salute at a

Bangkok cinema. She was detained and interrogated at the Bangkok Army Club for several hours before being released without charge. In Chiang Mai, Loei, and other provinces, soldiers and police have summoned activists and students who posted self-portraits on Facebook holding up a three-finger salute and ordered them to sign agreements to cease all “anti-coup activities.”

The 1st Police Region commissioner, Maj. Gen. Amnuay Nimmano, told the media that people are not allowed to oppose the sovereign authority of the NCPO.

Suppression of Free Expression and Public Assembly

As part of its crackdown and attempt to maintain its hold on power, the junta has repeatedly vowed to prosecute critics of the monarchy, in violation of the right to freedom of speech, Human Rights Watch said. Thai authorities have frequently used the offense of *lese majeste* (insulting the monarchy) under article 112 of the penal code to intimidate, arrest, and prosecute people accused of criticizing the king and members of the royal family. At least 14 new *lese majeste* cases are pending in the Bangkok military court and in criminal courts around Thailand. On November 18, the Bangkok military court sentenced online radio host Kathawut Bunpitak to five years in prison for insulting the king. On November 24, the Bangkok military court jailed website editor, known by his penname as Somsak Pakdeedech, four years and six months for publishing an article that Thai authorities deemed to defame the monarchy. Under martial law, a military court verdict is final and cannot be appealed. The Bangkok criminal court continues to deny bail applications for Patiwat Saraiyaem and Pornthip Munkong, who were arrested on August 14 and 15 respectively for their participation in “The Wolf Bride”—a play considered by the military authorities to be insulting to the monarchy.

On November 12, national police chief Pol. Gen. Somyot Poompanmuang announced a ban on the book “A Kingdom in Crisis: Thailand’s Struggle for Democracy in the Twenty-First Century,” written by former Reuters journalist Andrew MacGregor Marshall. The police said the book insulted and fomented hatred of members of the royal family. Using powers under the 2007 Printing Act, the police ordered the seizure and destruction of copies of the book. Violators of the ban are liable to a prison term of up to three years.

Since the coup, the NCPO has enforced a broad ban on discussion about political issues, including topics related to democracy, freedom, and human rights, Human Rights Watch said. On November 21, soldiers entered Burapha University in the eastern province of Chonburi and forced the university to cancel a “Rights and Freedom of the People” seminar organized by students activists. On November 22, Chulalongkorn University canceled a seminar on the topic “Desirable Parliamentary System for Democratic System” that was hosted by the Institute of Human Rights and Peace Studies because the organizers had not

received prior permission to hold the seminar from the NCPO.

The junta has also tightened restrictions on media. On November 13, Lt. Gen. Suchai Pongput, the NCPO-appointed head of a special committee to monitor media, said that reporting needed to be controlled to ensure reconciliation in society: “We do not limit media freedom but freedom must be within limits.” The military pressured Thai PBS TV to remove Nattaya Wawweerakhup from the talk show “Voices of the People That Must Be Heard Before the Reform” after she allowed participants on a November 8 program to criticize the coup and raise concerns about repression under military rule.

The NCPO’s suppression of free expression and public assembly makes the government’s self-proclaimed “reform” process into a sham that lacks broad-based participation and strictly follows the junta’s guidelines, Human Rights Watch said. Public forums on issues such as land reform, forest conservation, energy policy, and tax policy have been canceled by the military citing concerns that the discussions could fuel social divisions. Any gathering of more than five people can be prohibited under martial law.

The NCPO has also targeted activists who disagree with the NCPO’s reform process. For example, local military authorities summoned 16 activists in northeastern Thailand to report to them after 12 human rights and civil society organizations issued a statement on November 3 that they would not participate in the reform process initiated by the NCPO, whose legitimacy and authority they questioned. Some of those summoned reported as ordered and were released following questioning and after promising not to engage in any further political activities. Some were compelled to publicly recant their views and issue a statement to that effect on Facebook.

On November 9, the military arrested and briefly detained Professor Prapart Pintobtang, a political scientist from Chulalongkorn University, and three activists after they attempted to organize a march against the NCPO’s forestry policy, which Prapart and colleagues believe could lead to forced evictions of many poor villagers across Thailand.

“Instead of a path toward the return of democracy, the junta is tightening its grip on free speech and any public criticism,” Adams said. “Simply offering an opinion on politics can land a person in military court and prison. The junta needs to reverse course and revoke martial law, end rights abuses, and take concrete steps towards democratic elections if it wants to persuade the international community it’s not a dictatorship.”

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