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Thailand

18th Constitution approved!

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In September 2006, the prime minister of Thailand, Thaksin Shinawatra, twice elected by universal suffrage, [1] was overthrown by putschist generals claiming to save an endangered democracy. [2] On Sunday August 19, 2007, 45 million Thai voters were called to decide on a new Constitution drawn up last September by a group of so-called “experts” in democracy and other false representatives of society, selected and handsomely remunerated by the ruling military junta.

[<https://npa31.org/IMG/jpg/thaidemoc.jpg>]

“Yes” but...

To no great surprise, Thailand approved the new draft Constitution by 56.69% to 41.37%. The question was not really whether the “yes” camp would win, since the junta and the government had given it all the means necessary to victory, but what the rate of abstention would be and how much support there would be for a “yes” vote. From this point of view, with only 57.61% of voters and 1.94% spoilt ballots (25.9 million out of a total of 45 million electors), one cannot say that the new Constitution met with great support from the people. Nor did the result give any legitimacy to the putschists, the number voting “for” being a good deal lower than the number of votes obtained by the Thai Rak Thai (TRT), the former party led by Thaksin Shinawatra in April 2006 (16 million votes).

The junta was far from being sure of obtaining the clear and clean victory which it needed to legitimate the military coup. The government did not hope for more than 23 million voters but it expected a “yes” vote close to 70%. It counted on being able to rely more or less on around 5 million public employees and their families, who had been strongly “encouraged” to vote yes, and on a great number of the million voters in the south of the country who traditionally vote for the Democrat Party. [3] The opponents of the new Constitution would be split between the partisans of a “no” vote and the supporters of a boycott of the referendum. In the towns, numerous groups of opponents [4] refused to be involved in a process linked to last September’s coup. In the countryside, many villagers did not feel concerned by a debate which seemed very distant from the difficulties of their daily life – in particular the cost of living and indebtedness. . Many people received the text of the Constitution but few read it, reading it being far from easy. In the North and the Northeast, the poorest provinces of Thailand, their vote was rather about showing their unhappiness with the military junta and their attachment to Thaksin. Thus if the South, the centre and Bangkok voted in their majority for the “yes” camp, the North-East voted massively “no” (63%) sometimes very broadly as in the provinces of Nakhon Phanom (76.42% “no”), Roi Et (74.97% “no”) or Mukdahan (74.71% “no”). [5] The North, the other bastion of Thaksin, voted 45.8% against the new Constitution, obliging the military to recognise that division remains profound in a country where national unity and the negation of the existence of class interests form part of a knowingly constructed mythology.

A well orchestrated “yes” vote

The government appointed by the junta was nonetheless given all the necessary resources to favour a clear and clean victory of the “yes” camp and thus legitimise the new Constitution. At least 30 million bahts [6] were spent to pay for publicity campaigns in favour of a “yes” vote in the media, to distribute 18 million examples of the Constitution under a yellow cover (the colour of the king – an indication as to which way it was necessary to vote). [7] The campaign was marked by meetings filled with villagers, again dressed in yellow, who were offered between 100 and 300 bahts, [8] a meal and free transport to attend the meeting. According to “The Nation” general Sonthi stated that army officers had been sent into the countryside so as to make better understood to the people what democracy

meant. [9]

In a public speech, the prime minister designated by the junta, Surayud Chulanont, warned: that to campaign for a boycott or “no” vote could be recognised as illegal when the law calling the referendum took effect. [10] According to this law, to use influence to change the result is illegal. “Any person who organises disturbances, obstructs or does anything liable to disturb the referendum” could be sentenced to up to ten years in prison, a fine as high as 200,000 baths (4,400 euros) and a 5 years ban from participation in political life. According to the Asian Human Rights Commission, “it is clear that the main purpose of the law is to intimidate and silence persons who don’t share the official view”. [11] At the local level, the propaganda has been supported by all sorts of intimidation and use of force by the police against “no” vote activists - physical aggression against spokespersons, seizure of campaign material, imprisonment of protesters, threats against certain categories like the Bangkok taxi drivers who sported a sticker saying “we drive customers, not the Constitution”... On the contrary, Sonthi Boonyaratklin, the head of the ruling junta and coup leader found it perfectly justified to request his subordinates to campaign in favour of the “yes” vote. [12]

Of course, the royal family, which had endorsed the military coup of September 19, 2006 from the beginning, [13] also gave the thumbs up to the “yes” camp . In a speech on the occasion of his 75th birthday, king Sirikit requested that Buddhist monks who had organised a campaign of rejection of the Constitution stay outside of the political debate. This campaign had begun following the refusal by the designated “Constituent Assembly” (CDA) to give Buddhism the status of state religion. It is true that the civil war in the Muslim extreme south had no need of this supplementary provocation.

Beyond these manoeuvres and intimidations the government gave an altogether more threatening signal : the rejection of the Constitution would mean a postponement to the year 2008 of the general elections promised by the junta since its coming to power and envisaged after the king’s birthday in December 2007. In other world, that would have meant the maintenance in power of a government supervised by the military junta. A second and still more worrying threat : in case of a “no” majority the military junta had announced that it would arrogate for itself the right to choose one of the seventeen preceding reactionary constitutions, change it at its convenience, and promulgate it without prior vote!

In these conditions, it is understandable that more than one voter wanted to vote “no” but thought twice about it. What was worse: the adoption of a bad Constitution, but whose content was at least known, or to take a leap in the dark allowing a dozen generals to choose the Constitution? The dice were truly loaded.

“Democracy, what democracy?”

The referendum and the coming elections are not the signal for a return to democracy in a country which has a sad record in this area : 23 military coups and now 18 Constitutions since 1932.

At first sight, the holding of elections in December can appear as a first step towards a “return to normal”. But the prior adoption of a Constitution drawn up by a handful of not very progressive men and the tenor of the debates which presided at this drawing up unhappily indicate the contrary.

The editors of the new Constitution are impregnated with the old reactionary principle according to which it is better to give power to informed and educated people, who are found very often and by a happy chance to be wealthy, rather than to confide it to “uncultivated” but democratically elected unknowns. For the wealthy elites, the peasants and workers are big poorly educated children,, credulous and easily manipulated by anybody who knows how to buy their

vote with a few banknotes distributed at the right moment. To give them the right to vote is to allow them to make bad choices contrary to the national interest – which the wealthy identify with their personal interest. This is how the traditional bourgeoisie in Bangkok experienced the preceding period opened by the Constitution of 1997 and by the election in 2001 of Thaksin, a nouveau riche who had the intention of modifying the game of power and money in his favour. In their eyes as well as those of the military, the bureaucrats and their spokespersons in the media, Thaksin incarnated the tyranny of the rural majority and of uncivilised urban society against all those who saw themselves as being superior and being the only ones really capable of using the right to vote wisely. [14] Sidelined from power for many years, the traditional elites found effective relays in the middle layers of Bangkok and organised massive demonstrations against Thaksin in 2006. In the eyes of the poorest, Thaksin appeared as the only contemporary politician to have implemented significant social measures. [15] He is the only Thai prime minister to have obtained real, massive and durable support from the people. He is also the only person to have succeeded in uniting the rural voters and those of Bangkok in gaining 57.6 % of the votes in the capital against 33.6% for the Democrat Party in the elections of 2005. Despite several months of protest in Bangkok, he was predicted to win the elections envisaged in October 2006 and cancelled by the ruling military junta. In this respect, the coup and the rewriting of the Constitution have given the bourgeoisie the means of taking revenge, to (re)gain these posts of political responsibilities that it considered legitimate to occupy.

The new Constitution restates an old principle that prevailed in the precedents with the exception of that of 1997 : when the people could not be stopped from “voting wrong” it is necessary to quite simply limit their vote.

In relation to the composition of the Senate, whatever the size of their province, Thai voters will only have the chance to elect a single senator for each of the 76 provinces whereas 7 “super-voters”, including the spokesperson of the Senate, the representative of the opposition and the presidents of the Supreme, administrative and constitutional courts, although unelected, will hold the power to designate the 74 remaining members of the new Chamber which will be doubtless transformed into a club for retired generals. These “super-voters” will thus be among the most influential persons, well ahead of the prime minister and the president of the parliament.

Most of the members of the different Courts will be chosen by opaque internal selection processes inside of administrative and judicial systems. The remaining places will be attributed by the same presidents of the supreme and administrative Courts to experts in political science, social science, lawyers or specialists in religious studies. Although the Senate will have the right to approve the nominations, this latter has no possibility of making proposals nor even of blocking laws while the judges will still have the power to override any decisions that the Senate could take. It is to be very much feared that these powers given to the judges will undermine still further the already deeply compromised independence of the judiciary. [16]

Parliament is no better treated. The fear of returning to the previous situation where a single party, the TRT, dominated the absolute majority of parliament, has led to the reintroduction of a system of multiple electoral colleges. The drafters of the Constitution claim that this system, through the enlargement of the electoral colleges, should weaken clientelism and the purchase of votes, quasi-generalised practice in the country. In fact, the Constitution envisages 80 seats for the parties, 10 in each of the eight electoral constituencies. To be elected, a candidate to parliament must run in at least 6 districts. That will lead them to run not only against the opposing parties but also against the other candidates of their own party. Candidates who are not already wealthy or who are little known will have still less chance of being elected. In the opinion of all analysts, that would lead very rapidly to the (re)constitution of factions and to greater corruption. [17] The Thai press of August 21 illustrates it perfectly by devoting its front pages to party fusions and the “factions” positioning themselves for future elections. [18]

To contribute to the fragmentation, the 90-day clause which obliged candidates to be members of a party at least 90 days before the elections disappears from the new Constitution. The decision to reduce it to 30 days marks a return to the situation preceding the Constitution of 1997 during which the political factions and the members could “negotiate” their fidelity to the party, and where the political personnel played musical chairs through exchanges of

posts and favours.

It seems that in the minds of the drafters of the Constitution, this weakening of parliament counts for little. The latter will have a reduced place and action to the extent that the political and economic principles, in particular a strict control of public expenditure, that different governments must follow will be laid down in the Constitution and thus drawn up once and for all. No need any longer to run on the basis of an electoral programme, [19] it will be enough to refer to the principles laid down by King Bhumibol on the “sufficiency economy”.

The return of the military to power

Two other articles of the Constitution should be noted. The first is article 309 which, de facto, amnesties the military junta for the September coup but also for possible coups to come. Numerous lawyers and university professors have objected that a Constitution cannot authorise unconstitutional acts and that this article, if maintained, delegitimises the text as “supreme law”. Others have argued that this represented a bad precedent and could be an encouragement to other coups in the future. Alas! Despite the protests, the commission charged with the drawing up of the Constitution voted it through without debate or objection. [20]

The second article of the Constitution, which has unhappily had less publicity, is article 77 which stipulates that it is the duty of the state to provide the nation with modern weapons and armed forces at an “adequate level”. The term can appear anodyne but it breaks with article 83 of the Constitution of 1997 which stipulated that the state should follow the policy of “sufficiency”. [21]. in the military area. In practice this gives the generals the power to fix the budget of the army at the level that they wish every year [22]

The army intends to benefit from the coup to restore its power and its traditional grip on the state and on politics. The opprobrium that struck it following the bloody repression of 1992 had led it to return to the barracks and to “depoliticise” at least in appearance. The strong aspiration to more democracy subsequently led to a decline in the influence of the military and their aura in society. A draconian reduction of the army budget followed. In 1991, it represented 16% of the total budget of the government. In 2006 it only represented 6%. The return to power of the military 11 months ago has been largely put to profit to return to a more favourable situation. In 2007, the budget was increased by 33% (to reach 115 billion baths or around 2.5 billion euros) and a new increase of 24% for the 2008 budget is envisaged (143 billion baths or around 3.1 billion euros). [23]

Few voices were raised to denounce this. The “Bangkok elites” who demonstrated to bring Thaksin down have as a whole welcomed the military coup as a “necessary stage” for the establishment of democracy. Numerous activists belonging to NGOs and to the “civil sectors” of society, who struggled against Thaksin, have had little to say. The military having in their eyes “saved” democracy from the Thaksin peril, a number of them have not hesitated to join the ranks of the government and different commissions installed by the ruling junta. That a handful of soldiers should “restore” democracy by overthrowing a twice elected government does not pose them a problem, so convinced are they of the legitimacy of their action.

These events show that the choice of the great majority of voters counts less than that of small influential and well-organised groups. More than half of the country remains under martial law which forbids any gathering of more than 5 persons and all political activity. It is, in these conditions, very difficult for the majority of the population who live in the countryside and in the medium sized towns to mobilise. [24] Without counting the complicity of the great majority of the media which relay partial and biased information. [25]

The military, but not democracy

Barely a year after the coup and despite the fine words of the ruling military, the situation has hardly changed for the majority of Thais. They still expect democracy and the return of the military to the barracks. The country is more than ever divided. As to the excesses of the Thaksin era, they have not disappeared, far from it: abuses of power and the conflicts of interest, media control, the control of key institutional positions, the manipulations of the legal system are all continuing. Only the beneficiaries have changed : Thaksin's men have been replaced by bureaucrats, judges, and soldiers all in hock to the king. During these eleven months, the military have solidified their control of and their power over society and its institutions, without forgetting the boards of directors of the enterprises.

The law on "Thailand's internal security" is one of the main elements of this. This law, if it is voted through, will give immense powers to the head of the armies. This latter will become automatically the head of the ISOC (Internal Security Operations Command), structure originally created to combat the Communists! That would authorise him without mandate, "in case of threat to internal security", to arrest, detain, or search any person. He could impose a curfew, put anybody under house arrest, block roads, seize and confiscate what he wants, request all kinds of documents, give any order to any civil servant whatever their ministry and level in the hierarchy. The definition of internal security is very broad, ranging from violent acts to opposition propaganda, advertising or quite simply commentaries judged to be subversive. The head of the armies will exert this power without limit and without having to report to anyone whatever, not even to the prime minister. If this law is voted through, it would create a permanent state of semi-martial law. [26] A state within the state and the paradise of military juntas.

Second key element of the reinforcement of the military power : the decision of the Constitutional Court to dissolve the Thai Rak Thai and sentence 111 of its leaders to 5 years of ineligibility.

The TRT was accused of having bought small parties so that they could present candidates in certain constituencies during the elections of April 2006. Most of the parties opposed to Thaksin had decided at the time to boycott them. Indeed, in case of a single candidacy, the Thai Constitution of 1997 obliged the candidate to obtain at least 20% of the vote to be elected. That rendered the task difficult for the TRT in the South and in Bangkok in particular.

In order to bury it definitively and pave the way for the Democrat Party, the Constitutional Court took the decision to dissolve the TRT whereas in the same judgement, it completely absolved the Democrat Party from charges of having paid the small parties to accuse the TRT of fraud.

Parallel to this and although proofs of fraud and corruptions are still awaited, the AEC (Assets Examination Committee) [27] decided to freeze 21 of Thaksin's bank accounts, representing a total of 53 billion baths (around 1.15 billion euros!). A preventive measure to block Thaksin's supposed wealth being used to support anti-coup demonstrations (the military junta was worried by the size that the latter took).

A fragile democracy

Undeniably, the winners of this power struggle are for the moment the military, judiciary and royalist elites. In barely a year, they have succeeded in reversing the main democratic advances of the last 15 years.

Thailand was a fragile democracy. Its main weakness resided in the political structuring of the country. The working class, which was formed late during the industrial revolution of the years 1955-70, does not exist as a major political actor and does not have its own political representation. Unlike the other Asian countries of the region, Thailand was

not colonised by the western powers or by Japan. It has not seen the emergence of parties with a strong legitimacy established in the framework of a struggle for national independence. On the contrary, we can trace a historic continuity which goes back to the overthrow of the absolute monarchy and the establishment of a constitutional monarchy in 1932. The contemporary history of Thailand stresses the equilibrium inside the regime between the royalists, the military and the state apparatus of Bangkok, while in the background a trading then industrial bourgeoisie chose its best representatives according to the circumstances. [28] Thaksin was a sort of parenthesis in this history. He represented the decision of a conquering industrial bourgeoisie to take direct control of the conduct of the state. His party, the TRT, created so as to allow him to accede to power, was to a great extent constituted by the provincial chiefs, held in contempt by the military and the royalty.

Another weakness of Thai democracy is to have never really succeeded in imposing a clean separation between politics and business, allowing conflicts of interest to grow. The arrogance of Thaksin in undermining the traditional centres of power in Thailand contributed to his downfall : one does not threaten so easily the financial interests of the royal family and the army.

Finally, the emergence of democracy in Thailand was rendered more fragile by the very existence of the current monarchy, replaced in the saddle from 1957 onwards by the dictator Sarit Thanarat in concert with the United States. Thanks to a systematic indoctrination from the earliest age at school and in the family, Thai's are led to respect the "holy trinity" — king, religion and nation — represented absolutely everywhere by a national flag, a statue of Buddha and a photograph of the king. This brainwashing rests on modern means of communication, the cult of the royal family and the crime of lèse-majesté, which renders critical thought and the exercise of democratic liberties impossible. In this system designed by the oligarchies, the people are not citizens (prachathipattai baep Thai) but subjects of the king and servants of the nation (phonlamueang) and this whatever form the state takes.. Civil servants, known as "servants of the king" (kharatchakan), do not serve a particular government but the nation and the king [29] presented as "the incarnation of the nation". This representation of the king is a formidable instrument for muzzling criticism. The idea that the Thai people could exercise its sovereignty through the vote of its representatives finds no place in such a system because it comes into conflict with the sovereign sooner or later. Thaksin's electoral legitimacy and his great popularity had the inconvenience of threatening this set-up directly.

Sufficiency economy

Aspirations to democracy have nonetheless not been stifled. The army have not succeeded in convincing anyone of the sincerity of their "declared intention" to return power to a democratically elected government, or of developing any kind of social policy favouring the most deprived. The interim government, although denouncing the reckless expenditure of Thaksin, has taken good care not to withdraw the most popular measures. It has however renamed several of Thaksin's main policies, like that of care at 30 baths (it has since become free) and low interest loans to all villages.

In the economic area, 11 months in power have been enough to show the lack of means of the economic policy of the appointed government. Thaksin had conceived a policy of "mega-projects" of investment in each region, allying public and private capital and designing a project of development for Thai capitalism. These projects could be criticised from many points of view but traced a long-term perspective for local and foreign investors. The junta's government has suspended these projects but has not proposed anything to replace them. To hide this vacuum, the military have again had recourse to the symbols of the monarchy, thus stifling any criticisms. The new Constitution obliges all future governments to implement the policies of the "sufficiency economy" elaborated by the king. What does this amount to? To read the recent report that the UNDP devoted to the development of Thailand, "the sufficiency economy is an innovative approach to development... [It is] an approach to life and conduct which is applicable at every level from the individual through the family and the community to the management and

development of the nation... Sufficiency has three key principles: moderation, wisdom or insight and the need for built-in resistance against the risks which arise from internal or external change...". [30]

To deal with these risks, the principles advocated are: "Work in stages; build a base of self-reliance before moving ahead; be economical; learn continuously". [31] In a country where the crime of lèse- majesté is a major crime, who would dare to doubt the pertinence of an economic policy drawn up by the king? One can however doubt the effectiveness of such a potion. Andrew Walker [32] argues that this vision of the king is based on an incorrect analysis of the current situation in the countryside. In numerous regions, low productivity of land combined with an increasing population renders self-sufficiency quite simply impossible. To respond to this situation, local agriculture has diversified and rests on economic and social links which go beyond the framework of the community. That renders obsolete the "royal economic thought" which recommends developing external links only when the foundations of self-sufficiency are solid. For Walker, the sufficiency economy is nothing other than an ideological instrument that the elites use to justify the absence of redistribution of wealth and resources. In this ideological framework, any request for allocation of resources towards poor rural communities is ruled out as being immoderate and populist, undermining the foundations of the rural community. Rather than the redistribution of resources and wealth, the sufficiency economy insists on the development of one's own capacities, resting on the ideological resources of Buddhism. Let's quote the UNDP report again : "In Buddhism, the world is a place of suffering. By being born in this world, humans encounter suffering.. But the message of Buddha is that each person has the ability to overcome this suffering by developing the mental ability to understand it, and eventually to rise above it. People have to do this themselves. There is no outside help that offers a short cut. Happiness is the conquest of suffering by the human mind". [33] The message could not be clearer : if the poor are poor, it is because they do not know how to implement solutions adapted to the means available to them. . The poor are asked not to make demands and to adapt. One is astonished by the complicity of the UNDP Thailand with respect to this pseudo-theory which is nothing other than a class response to the economic crisis of the mid-1990s.

These "economic views" have however a great "quality", that of having been drawn up by the king, which renders them indisputable (without committing the crime of lèse-majesté). It is however very doubtful that this renders their application popular in the eyes of the majority of Thaïs. Thailand is a country where the lowering of poverty is accompanied by increasing inequality. If in 2000 only 2% of the population lived on less than 1 dollar per day (absolute poverty threshold according to the international institutions), the part which earns between 1 and 3 dollars per day (the threshold of relative poverty) still represented more than 50% of the population. Indeed, it is estimated that around 4 dollars per day, or around 500 baths, is needed to raise a family of 4 persons decently. The first chapter of the UNDP report [34] is edifying on the subject of the situation in which a majority of Thaïs live their daily lives. Three quarters of the population possess their own house on their own land and 99% have access to electricity, tap water and clean sanitary facilities. But during the last decade, the quality of water has deteriorated, waste management has not kept up with rural development, and pollution has got worse. Income inequality remains significant : the richest 20% of the population account for 55.2% of the total income, while the poorest 20% possessed only 7% in 2002. The crisis of over-indebtedness of households is now taking on dramatic proportions : a typical household now spends on average 88.5% of its income on consumption. Savings which represented on average 13.4% of household income in 1999 fell to 6.3 % in 2003. From 1996 to 2004, the proportion of households in debt went from half to two thirds, this proportion rising to 78.7% in the Isaan (North East), the poorest region of Thailand. The average amount of indebtedness went from 68,000 baths in 2000 to 104,571 baths in 2004, or around 20 months minimum wage (5,000 baths).

The increase in the number of aged persons coupled with a reduction in the number of children per family, 2 on average today, will render still more acute the absence of a pensions system. In 2004, 29.8% of households were of single women with children, this situation resulting mostly from divorces or simply abandonment by the husband.

So the policy of junta and its government which can be summed up as remaining in power and maintaining the social status quo while hiding behind the "sufficiency economy", will not change the givens of the situation. One can

expect great political instability before and after the elections planned for December 23. Moreover, the edifice put in place by the dictatorship over these eleven months has a great weakness. Who will be the next prime minister? The TRT which, following the dissolution of the party, quickly exploded into several factions, seems to be recovering a dominant weight in the political landscape.

The dissolution of the TRT seemed to have left the way clear to Abhisit Vejjajiva, head of the Democrat Party. But his electoral base is reduced to the South and Bangkok, reducing considerably his chances of winning the elections. There remains the solution under which the head of the junta, Sonthi : would found his own party and throw himself into the electoral race. Déjà vu on the Thai political scene. [\[35\]](#)

Neither Thaksin, nor junta, but democracy!

Despite this disastrous situation, the aspiration to democracy remains strong and the majority of Thai's are not satisfied with this situation. As witness to this, despite the absence of democratic debate around the elaboration of the Constitution, numerous protests and proposals have emerged at the reading of the draft when it was unveiled. The main problem resides in the non-existence of left political parties of all tendencies, with a minimum audience and implantation; as well as the weakness and fragmentation of the trade union movement and NGOs.

The trade union movement is implanted in the civil service, the public sector enterprises and some big private enterprises. At the national level, the rate of trade unionisation represents only 3% of the active population. There are 10 trade union confederations of which the most important are the "Thai Trade Union Congress" (TTUC) and the "Labour Congress of Thailand" (LCT) affiliated to the "International Confederation of Free Trades Unions" (ICFTU, now ITUC), but their activity is very weak and they exercise no influence on national politics. The branch federations are a little more active according to the trade union teams and attempt to coordinate. But essential trade union activity is most often limited to the scale of the workplaces. Struggles for wages, job security and respect for holidays sometimes take place in the workplaces, but these struggles do not succeed in linking up with each other. The labour legislation imposed by the different dictators and maintained by the civilian governments forbids "any external interference" in social conflicts which break out in workplaces. At the national level, the unions demand the creation of a single minimum daily wage for the whole of Thailand and its increase, the creation of a maximum length of working time, the creation of a real system of social protection, the effective right to create trade unions [\[36\]](#) and to collective bargaining and the right for workers to vote at their workplace and not in their region of origin. Many social standards of work defined by the ILO (International Labour Organisation) are not recognised or respected in fact. . One of the particularly retrograde aspects of the Constitution of 1997 is the stipulation that candidates for elections to parliament are holders of a university diploma.. This provision seeks explicitly to prevent political, trade union and associative activists originating from the popular layers from contesting elections.

The weakness of the trade union movement was again revealed in its inability to build a united front against the coup and the new Constitution. Certain union leaders were so opposed to Thaksin, who had begun a process of privatisation of public enterprises, that they agreed to support the junta and its Constitution, gambling on the junta putting an end to the privatisations. Profiting from the confusion, the military junta has succeeded in dividing the union movement by buying off a part of its leadership and financing their organisations, but without committing themselves to the slightest promise. The trade union movement is divided into three main groups. [\[37\]](#)

One group, which rallied around 20,000 demonstrators dressed in yellow on May 1, 2007, openly supports the junta to the point that its main leader, Manas Kosol, [\[38\]](#), has been appointed a member of the "national legislative assembly" created by the junta after the coup. His group is said to have received 3 million bahts in return for its support. It essentially comprises trade unions from the public enterprises whose first concern is to bring an end to privatisation. Manas Kosol has formulated 9 requests to Prime Minister Surayud who received him at the seat of

government : an increase in the minimum wage, a price freeze on basic needs products, authorisation for workers to vote at their workplace and not in their province of origin, an end to the privatisation of state enterprises, free care for the retired who have paid contributions to the social security system.

A second group which rallied around 2,000 people on May 1, has joined the “ People Action for Democracy “ (PAD), a coalition of parties, (supported by the Democrat Party), associations and adventurers which organised the mobilisation against Thaksin and which now supports the junta and the Constitution. This support has allowed a number of its leaders to personally enrich themselves by accepting posts in the new government, the new institutions and their cortège of various commissions. This second group is said to have received 2 million baths from the government for promoting the Constitution. One of its main leaders, Somsak Kosaisuk is also one of the leaders of the PAD.

The third group is called “the 1550 Labour Assembly”. Led by Somyot Pruksakacem, it claims 10,000 members notably in the food and textile industries. It attracted 2,000 demonstrators on Mayday.. This latter group is the only one to remain faithful to the independence of the workers’ movement and to frontally oppose the dictatorship and Thaksin.

In the associative movement, many NGOs have also accepted the coup as a necessary evil to obtain the departure of Thaksin and then return to democracy. Only a minority has refused any compromise. Following the coup a small group of students of the Thammasat University created the “19 September network against the coup” [39]. This network denounced the claim of the military to have restored democracy and distributed leaflets in the universities but also at factory gates in the industrial estates where they encountered security guards and police. Without exaggerating its influence, it has played a not insignificant role in the affirmation of a pole of resistance and in showing that there was not unanimous support for the coup as the military claimed. This network was active in the campaign for a “no” vote in the Constitution. A second association, “the Midnight University”, [40] which plays the role of a popular university based in the University of Chiang Mai in the north of Thailand, denounced the coup from September 28, 2006. Their Internet site was censored by the junta after the University had called on its members to tear up the text of the draft Constitution. [41].

The only group to have succeeded in organising regular rallies and demonstrations of several thousand persons is the “United Front for Democracy Against the Dictatorship” [42] which brings together supporters of Thaksin and various opponents of the dictatorship. Suspected of being financed under the table by the immense fortune of the former prime minister in exile, this third group has aroused distrust from other opponents to the dictatorship and has generated debates leading to further divisions. Is it or is it not necessary to create a common front of all the components of the opposition to the dictatorship? In practice, unity has not prevailed as the divergences are large, even if nobody has sought to deepen them.

This weakness of the organised opposition to the dictatorship and the confusion which reigns is often explained in the final analysis by the same handicap : the absence of one or several political parties intransigently defending the interests of the workers in full independence from the state. The history of the workers’ movement and its continuity has been lost and there is a lot of rebuilding to be done. Yet the memory of past struggles against dictatorships, the discontent of the peasants and popular layers about the cost of living and the harshness of their everyday conditions show that the potential exists for a new party, which can draw the lessons from the errors of the past (notably from the shipwreck of Maoism), and can integrate the debates of the international workers’ movement, develop and offer a progressive perspective.

Bangkok, August 28, 2007

[1] In 2001 and 2005. The elections of April 2006 that he had postponed have been cancelled

[2] See Danielle Sabañ and Jean Sanuk, "[The coup d'etat – a step backwards for Thailand and Southeast Asia](#)", IV 521, November 2006

[3] The Democrat Party is the oldest party in Thailand for a simple reason: it was created immediately after the Second World War by the "royalists" who wished to help the royal family recover its nationalised property, power and prerogatives. They succeeded and were rewarded by being given a share in power with the military. All the left parties, whether of social-democratic or Communist tendency, were eliminated by repression. See. James Ockey, "Variations On A Theme. Societal Cleavages and Party Orientations Through Multiple Transitions in Thailand", Party Politics, Vol. 11, n° 6, pp. 728-747.

[4] See details below

[5] Results published in the "Bangkok Post" of August 20 and "The Nation" of August 21, 2007

[6] 6. Around 660,000 euros, equivalent to the monthly minimum wage of around 6,000 persons

[7] So that the reader can better understand the subtleties of the propaganda, it should be said that for a little less than a year, millions de Thaïs have worn yellow shirts or t-shirts on Monday to show their loyalty to the king, who was born on a Monday, or blue on Friday out of respect for the queen, who was born on that day. In Thailand, Theravada Buddhism attributes a different colour to every day of the week

[8] The price of a meal or a journey on public transport for a peasant or worker is around 30 bahts

[9] "Everything on Track : Sonthi", "The Nation". June 19, 2007

[10] "Anti-Charter Moves "Illegal"", "The Nation", July 3, 2007

[11] Quoted by Daniel Ten Kate, "Thailand on Spin Cycle", July 11,. www.asiasentinel.com

[12] Chang Noi, "Fixing the General Election", August 6, 2007. www.geocities.com/changnoi2/ Chang Noi is an independent journalist who publishes interesting viewpoints in "The Nation"

[13] According to all appearances, the main adviser to the king, Prem Tinsulanonda, was at the origin of this hasty support to the putschists. He is considered as the main figure behind the coup, and as one of the most powerful people in Thailand. Young oppositionists have courageously circulated a petition demanding his resignation, in a country where one is very easily accused of the (capital) crime of lèse-majesté

[14] Michael H. Nelson, "People's Sector Politics in Thailand: Problems of Democracy in Ousting Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra", Working Paper Series n° 87, May 2007, Southeast Asia Research Center, City University of Hong Kong. <http://www.cityu.edu.hk/search/>.

[15] On the social balance sheet of the Thaksin era, see : Danielle Sabañ and Jean Sanuk, "[Crisis in the Land of the Smile](#)", IV 376, March 2006

[16] Recent postings on their Internet site by the Asian Legal Resource Center and the Asian Human Rights Commission of telephone conversations held in the past year between two judges and an (unidentified) bureaucrat concerning the cancellation of the elections of April 2006 are a sad example of the use of justice to political ends.

[17] "A Tale of Two Constitutions to Confuse All", "The Nation", August 14, 2007

[18] See the editions of the "Bangkok Post" and "The Nation"

[19] Chang Noi, "From the People's Constitution to the Judges' Constitution", April 30, 2007. www.geocities.com/changnoi2/

[20] "Charter's Military-Related Articles Still Raise Questions", "The Nation", August 13, 2007

[21] The term "sufficiency" plays a key role in the writings of the king and serves as official doctrine which all ministers should support at least in appearance. The Thai term is "phor phieng"

[22] 22. "Charter's Military-Related Articles Still Raise Questions", "The Nation", August 13, 2007

[23] "Military Spending to Soar a Further 24 %", "The Nation", June 28, 2007

[24] Michael H. Nelson, op. cit.

[25] "The Nation", a daily English language newspaper, supported the coup as a necessary stage for the country in the transition to democracy

[26] Chang Noi, "A State at War with its People", July 9, 2007. www.geocities.com/changnoi2/.

[27] AEC is the acronym for the commission charged with investigating cases of corruption and possible fraud relating to Thaksin, set up by the military junta

[28] Danielle Sabañ and Jean Sanuk, "[An Unending Spiral of Coups?](#)" IV 521, November 2006

[29] Michael H. Nelson, op.cit.

[30] "Thailand Human Development Report: Sufficiency Economy and Human Development Â», "Overview Â», page XV., UNDP, 2007. This report has annoyed quite a few members of the UNDP, who see it as a propaganda operation

[31] "Thailand Human Development Report: Sufficiency Economy and Human Development, "Thinking out the Sufficiency Economy", UNDP 2007, Chapter 2, p. 29.

[32] Andrew Walker is an anthropologist and a member of the "Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies", Australian National University. He is responsible for a website on Southeast Asia <http://rspas.anu.edu.au/rmap/newmandala/>.

[33] "Thailand Human Development Report: Sufficiency Economy and Human Development, "Thinking out the Sufficiency Economy", UNDP 2007, Chapter 2, p. 31

[34] All the elements which follow are drawn from UNDP 2007, op. cit.

[35] This option had been taken by the general Suchinda Krapayoon in 1992. His decision to become prime minister had led to violence and subsequently to the withdrawal of the military from political life. Chang Noi, "Risks on the Road to Managed Democracy", July 24, 2007.

[36] 36. Numerous professions do not have the right to set up trade unions. . "The national legislative assembly" has thus just confirmed the ban slapped on journalists establishing a union to defend their interests

[37] Information drawn from an interview with Somyot Pruksakacem, trade unionist and co-founder of The 1550 Labour Assembly, which appeared in "The Nation", May 7, 2007

[38] Manas Kosol presents himself as the president of the Employees' Labour Development Council of Thailand

[39] 39. 19 September Network against the Coup, www.wevotno.net

[40] The Midnight University, <http://www.midnightuniv.org/> allows workers to gain an education, but also to meet and to discuss. . Its Internet site is

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visited every month by 2.5 million surfers, and contains 20,000 pages of documents freely accessible in the area of the natural and social sciences and humanities

[41] See their appeal against the closure of their website published in French on the site Europe Solidaire sans Frontières, http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?page=article_impr&id_article=3351.

[42] United Front of Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD)