

Public Participation in Political Transformation: From the Coup D'etat in 2014 to the Events Leading up to the Proposed Election in 2018 in Thailand

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Abstract : This article uses the recent events in Thailand as a case study for examining why democratic transition is necessary during political upheaval to ensure that the people's power remains unaffected. After seizing power in May 2014, the military, backed by anti-government protestors, selected and established their own system to govern the country. They set up the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) which established a People's Assembly, aiming to reach a compromise between the conflicting opinions of former, pro-government and anti-government protesters. It plans to achieve this through political reform before returning sovereign power to the people via an election in 2018. If a governmental authority is not representative of the people (e.g. a military government) it does not count as a legitimate government. During the last four years of military government, from May 2014 to January 2018, their rule of Thailand has been widely controversial, specifically regarding their commitment to democracy, human rights violations and their manipulation of the rule of law. Democratic legitimacy relies not only on established mechanisms for public participation (like referendums or elections) but also public participation based on accessible and educational reform (often via NGOs) to ensure that the free and fair will of the people can be expressed. Through their actions over the last three years, the Thai military government has damaged both of these components, impacting future public participation in politics. The authors make some observations about the specific actions the military government has taken to erode the democratic legitimacy of future public participation: the increasing dominance of military courts over civil courts; civil society's limited involvement in political activities; the drafting of a new constitution and their attempt to master support through referenda and its consequence for delaying organic law-making process; the structure of the legislative powers (Senate and the members of parliament); and the control of people's basic freedoms of expression, movement and assembly in political activities. One clear consequence of the military government's specific actions over the last three years is the increased uncertainty amongst Thai people that their fundamental freedoms and political rights will be respected in the future. This will directly affect their participation in future democratic processes. The military government's actions (e.g. their response to the UN representatives) will also have influenced potential international engagement in Thai civil society to help educate disadvantaged people about their rights, and their participation in the political arena. These actions challenge the democratic idea that there should be a checking and balancing of power between people and government. These examples provide evidence that a democratic transition is crucial during any process of political transformation.

Keywords : political transformation, public participation, Thailand coup d'etat 2014, election 2018

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