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Asia - Thailand

All-out dictatorship

Thailand's Gen. Prayut – a new “Predator of Press Freedom”

3 April 2015

Media freedom has declined dramatically in Thailand in the ten months since a military coup in May 2014. What with interrogations of journalists, raids on leading news organizations and plans for draconian legislation, the military government is subjecting the media to constant harassment.

The latest outrage is Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha threat to “execute” journalists who don't toe the line. Reporters Without Borders condemns the government's policy of controlling and intimidating the media.

Gen. Prayut, who is both prime minister and head of the National Council for Peace and Order, made this comment at a [news conference on 25 March](#). Asked what the government would do journalists who do not stick to the official line, he replied: “We'll probably just execute them.”

He gave no indication that he was speaking in jest.

Prayut already [gave his views on journalism](#) on 5 March, celebrated as “Reporters Day” in Thailand. He said journalists should “play a major role in supporting the government's affairs, practically creating the understanding of government's policies to the public, and reduce the conflicts in the society.”

Prayut has cracked down hard on those who defy his policies and defend the fundamental right to criticize. Since imposing martial law in May 2014, he has gagged not only reporters, bloggers and news outlets, but also performers, intellectuals, academics, opposition politicians and anyone regarded as overly critical of himself or his government.

The growing hostility towards the media that he has voiced publicly in recent weeks has drawn the entire world's attention to his contempt for freedom of information and its defenders, who are regarded by Prayut as a threat to the nation.

Propaganda and threats

Prayut has a weekly TV show that he uses to intimidate the media. Called “[Returning Happiness to Thailand](#),” it is broadcast nationwide and gets its name from a song he composed. On this show, he explains government policy, criticizes the way the media have covered the latest news, accuses news editors not paying him enough attention, and calls for more “cooperation.”

Last September, Prayut threatened to create new laws that would result in “inconveniences to journalists, the press, radio channels, and television channels.” A cyber-security bill unveiled in January, talk of new broadcast media regulations and [comments](#) about making reporters sit exams suggest that he is beginning to carry out his threats.

When journalists wish him a happy birthday, they can expect a kind word or an expression of goodwill from the general, but he reacts in a completely different manner when they show signs of independence by exposing corruption or grave human rights violations.

On 25 March, he accused **Thapanee Iestsrichai**, a well-known investigative reporter with *Channel 3*, of harming the Thai economy by exposing human trafficking in the fishing industry. During a visit to the Indonesian island of Benjina, Thapanee discovered graves containing the remains of hundreds of Thai citizens.

Instead of applauding for Thapanee for a piece of investigative reporting in the public interest,

[Prayut attacked her](#). "What will happen if we report this in a big way, telling the world about our trafficking and illegal fishing problems? What if they stop buying fish worth 200 billion baht from us? Will you take the responsibility?"

Ever-tighter control

The military government is not just trying to control the traditional media. Its proposed cyber-security law would allow the National Council for Peace and Order to insist that Internet Service Providers cooperate with its surveillance of online activity.

Citing "national security" needs – which, like defence of the monarchy, is constantly used as grounds for censoring and arresting Internet users – the proposed law would also allow the authorities to place all electronic communications under surveillance in Thailand.

The Internet thought police meanwhile continue to arrested online activists and human rights defenders. The victims include [Anon Numpa](#), a human rights lawyer who has defended many people arrested on lèse-majesté charges. The military have accused him of posting opinions hostile to the government on Facebook and other websites.

Gen. Prayut [announced on 31 March](#) that he was going to lift martial order (which has been in place since the coup) and replace it by a judicial order under [article 44 of the provisional constitution](#) introduced in July. This article says the head of the National Council for Peace and Order "may issue any order or direct any action to be done or not to be done, irrespective of whether the order or action would produce legislative, executive or judicial effect."

Recommendations

Reporters Without Borders calls on the prime minister to end his draconian policies and to promote an environment that encourages media activity and the free flow of news and information, including online information, by taking the following measures:

- ▶ Refrain from using the powers allowed under the provisional constitutional, in particular article 44, which would leave the media without any protection and would open the way for arbitrary government control of news and information.
 - ▶ Refrain from adopting laws allowing large-scale surveillance of the Internet and refrain from introducing a new cyber-security law allowing individual surveillance.
 - ▶ Stop summoning and arresting journalists, bloggers and other information providers on the pretext of defending national security or the monarchy.
 - ▶ Stop threatening news media and journalists with reprisals, stop pressuring the media to censor themselves and stop interfering with editorial policies or any other internal media matters.
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