
EU TO THAILAND : 'FREE AND FAIR ELECTIONS' OR FACE CONSEQUENCES

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Senior MEPs have warned the military junta ruling Thailand that the country must return to free and fair elections or risk the future of all EU-Thailand relations.

Thailand has been under the rule of General Prayuth Chan-ocha since May 2014, when he staged a coup to overthrow the democratically-elected government of Yingluck Shinawatra.

A delegation of MEPs from the ASEAN delegation (Association of South East Asian Nations) and the subcommittee on human rights visited Thailand this week – the first official visit by MEPs since the coup.

In the meantime, the EU has broken off negotiations on a bilateral free trade agreement between Brussels and Bangkok, and the countrys key \$3bn fish export industry has been placed under a yellow card for abuses of fish stocks and labour rights abuses.

At the end of the three-day visit, the group – headed by Dr Werner Langen, the chair of the ASEAN delegation – warned that the future of EU-Thailand relations depends on free and fair elections.

Chan-ocha has promised a referendum on the draft constitution on 7 August, followed by a general election in mid-2017.

EU AMBASSADORS CONFRONT THAI JUNTA OVER REFERENDUM FEARS

Nearly 20 EU ambassadors in Bangkok have confronted the military junta with their fears over the countrys forthcoming referendum on a new constitution.

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However, both the constitution itself and the freedom to campaign for and against it have been heavily criticised by human rights groups.

Pointedly, the 8-strong delegation warn in their statement that both the referendum and the roadmap to democracy plan must be the result of an inclusive process allowing for an open debate among all stakeholders.

They add, In this context, the delegation made it clear that a return to democratic structures and free and fair elections constitute important conditions for the future development of bilateral relations between the EU and Thailand.

The MEPs met with a variety of stakeholders during their visit to Thailand, including former prime minister Yingluck Shinawatra, both the Pheu Thai party and the Democrat party, the constitution drafting committee and NGOs and academics.

The meeting with Yingluck – sister of the former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra – was arranged after the junta refused her permission last year to travel to Brussels to address the European Parliament.

THAILAND: THE MILITARY JUNTA ANSWERS ITS CRITICS

The military junta in Thailand says it understands the concerns raised in Europe over the constitution drafting process currently underway but says the regime intends to stick to its roadmap for a return to democracy, with elections scheduled in 2017. The government has no desire to stay in power longer than necessary, says Sek Wannamethee, a government spokesperson.

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Commenting after the meeting, Yingluck said, They [the MEPs], overall, would like to see our country gearing towards democracy and elections as soon as possible.

The request [by the MEPs] to observe the referendum process is the matter to be discussed between the MEPs and the government.

People have been waiting for our country to return to democracy for two years. Thai people wish for a general election as soon as possible which would restore peoples rights, freedom and democracy. I wish to see this progress otherwise the two years past would have been lost in vain.

Langen sounded sceptical about the prospects about the referendum, and the long-term future of Thai democracy.

Speaking at the end of the visit, he said, I believe that the current draft constitution that will be put to a referendum contains many opportunities to keep political democratic parties from power for quite some time, and I dont believe that that is the right way to overcome the political differences between the two parties.

There needs to be more willingness to work on compromise. And I dont believe that the right way forward is to have a military regime in place on a long-term basis, and that is why it would be very difficult to answer the question as to what would happen if the military regime were to remain in place.

Suggesting that there should be the opportunity to consider possible amendments to the text of the referendum, he said a democratic transition would involve either fresh elections or some form of coalition.

I believe personally it would be quite difficult to foresee a military regime in power on a longer term basis.

Election to be scrapped?

However, according to the Bangkok Post earlier this week Chan-ocha has threatened to scrap next years tentative elections if the referendum is passed.

Deputy Prime Minister Prawit Wongsuwon was cited as quoting the military general that if the draft charter fails to pass the referendum, Chan-ocha would have to stay on to oversee a new constitution and a general election after that – with no time frame mentioned.

Earlier this week, Thailand's human rights record under the junta again came in for heavy criticism. In the wake of last weeks periodic review of human rights at the United Nations in Geneva, where Bangkok received 249 recommendations from some 97 UN member states, human rights bodies accused the government in Bangkok of deceiving the international community.

A joint statement from the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), the Union for Civil Liberty (UCL) and the Thai-based Internet Law Reform Dialogue (iLaw), pointed to the Universal Periodic Review by the UN as an attempt by the Thai government to sweep human rights violations under the carpet.

Although the military junta accepted 181 of the UN recommendations, iLaw executive director Jon Ungpakom commented, Accepting most recommendations related to civil and political rights does not require any capacity on the governments part. In order to implement many of those recommendations, the military junta simply needs to return the civil and political rights taken away from the people after the 2014 coup.

Jaturong Boonyarattanasoontom, chair of UCL, said, The gap between the Thai governments words and its actions is as wide as ever.

ZERO CHANCE OF THAILAND FTA UNDER JUNTA, COMMISSION OFFICIAL SAYS

EXCLUSIVE / The suspended Free Trade Agreement with Thailand will never be ratified whilst the country is under a military dictatorship, a top aide to EU Trade Commissioner Cecilia Malmstrom admitted on Friday (20 November).

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Earlier this month, the Thai government announced a raft of measures aimed at tackling its persistent breaches of the Illegal, Unregulated and Unreported (IUU) fishing protocols, which have seen the EU Commission issue its export sector with a red card and complete import ban.

The measures largely target foreign-flagged vessels that may have been involved in illegal fishing in Thai waters, to prevent illegal catches entering the seafood supply chain.

EU TEAM VISITS THAILAND TO ASSESS FISHING INDUSTRY CLEANUP

A European Union delegation that is visiting Thailand to weigh its progress in battling illegal and unregulated fishing will not make a decision this week on whether to ban Thai seafood products, the government in Bangkok said on Tuesday (19 January).

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TIMELINE

7 August 2016: Referendum on draft constitution

"Mid-2017": Promised elections - first since military coup of May 2014

Kaynak/Source: