

Thai voters 'approve' Military-backed constitution in referendum; election likely to be held next year

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Bangkok: Thai voters on Sunday overwhelmingly approved a new junta-backed Constitution that would pave the way for an election next year and give the military, which seized power in a coup two years ago, the final say on future elected governments.

Thailand's PM Prayuth Chan-ocha prepares to cast his vote in a referendum

The Constitution lays the foundation for a civilian government influenced by the military and controlled by appointed "rather than elected" officials.

Thai voters cast ballots for the first time since the military toppled the government, choosing whether to approve or reject a junta-backed Constitution.

With 91 percent of the ballots counted, 62 percent of the voters said they approved of the constitution, while 38 percent rejected it, Election Commissioner Somchai Srisutthiyakorn told reporters. He said the result was not expected to change much after all votes are in.

Only 55 percent of Thailand's roughly 50 million registered voters cast ballots in the referendum.

The draft won approval in all regions, except the Northeast, which is the stronghold of former premier Thaksin Shinawateea.

Although the majority of voters approved the constitution, the vote is likely to be met by some skepticism. The junta led by Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha, a retired army general who has severely curtailed dissent since coming to power in a 2014 coup imposed severe restrictions on public discussion of the proposed constitution.

Ahead of the referendum, the junta banned political rallies and open discussion about the constitution, and criticism of the draft was made punishable by 10 years in jail. Critics say the restrictions ensured that most people were unaware of the pitfalls of the charter, and were probably anxious to get the long-drawn process over with so that they could move on.

The "yes" vote "adds that touch of legitimacy to the coup makers," Pavin Chachavalpongpun, an associate professor at the Center for Southeast Asian Studies of Kyoto University in Japan, told The Associated Press.

"It gives them the green light for the next few steps they want to take. They will say the opposition cannot say anything now," said Pavin, who is Thai and is a vocal critic of the junta.

Prayuth's office, however, said in a statement late Sunday that the referendum "was conducted with a high degree of transparency and openness on part of the government."

Despite the curbs on civil liberties, Prayuth's rule has brought a measure of stability and ended the frequent street violence and divisive politics that had frayed Thailand's social fabric for years. That veneer of stability could help explain the "yes" vote for the new constitution.

There was also the allure of new elections that Prayuth has promised to hold in 2017, after the approval of the new constitution, although he's said he would call the vote even if the referendum was defeated.

The charter "speaks to a lot of worries and concerns that a majority of Thai people have," Gotham Areeya, a professor at Thailand's Mahidol University, told the AP. "Many Thais want to see an end to corruption and the return of peace and development. Even though experts like me may criticize it a lot, our message just didn't reach a lot of the people."

In addition to asking for an opinion on the constitution, the referendum also asked a supplementary question on whether voters wanted an appointed Senate to choose a prime minister. That question elicited a less enthusiastic approval â€” 58 percent "yes" and 42 percent "no."

Analysts have said that a "yes" vote would be a setback for democracy in Thailand.

Pavin, the Kyoto University professor, said that even when the military is no longer in power and a civilian government is in place after the 2017 elections, the military "will have the constitution as a remote control. The constitution can be used as a device to hold onto political power."

The main criticisms of the draft constitution are:

â€” A transition period of at least five years to civilian rule.

â€” A 250-member appointed Senate that includes the commanders of the army and other security services.

â€” A deadlock in the 500-member elected lower house could trigger a selection of a prime minister who is not an elected member of parliament. Under the abolished 2007 constitution, half the Senate was elected, and the prime minister had to come from the lower house.

â€” Emergency decrees enacted by the junta without any parliamentary consent remain valid.

Thailand has endured 13 successful military coups and 11 attempted takeovers since it replaced an absolute monarchy with a constitutional one in 1932. This would be Thailand's 20th constitution.

Leaders of the latest coup say frequent political conflicts had made the country ungovernable and that military rule was necessary for stability. The junta set up hand-picked committees to draft a charter that would enshrine its declared goal of reforming politics by eliminating corruption.

But others believe the new constitution has a different aim: to weaken allies of former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, the central figure in the roiling of Thai politics.

Thaksin's political machine has easily won every national election since 2001, mainly due to the support of working-class and rural voters who benefited from his populist policies. Leading the other side is Thailand's traditional ruling class and royalists - known as the "yellow shirts" - unnerved by Thaksin's support, especially as it contemplates its future. King Bhumibol Adulyadej, whose righteous rule has anchored the kingdom since 1946, is 88 and ailing.

The army ousted Thaksin in a 2006 coup, after "yellow shirt" protesters took to the streets and accused him of abuse of power, corruption and disrespecting the king. He has lived abroad since 2008 to avoid prison for a corruption conviction that he says was politically motivated. The 2014 coup ousted his sister Yingluck Shinawatra, who was elected prime minister in 2011.

Those who brought Thaksin down now seek to weaken major political parties, which would ensure that real power stays in the hands of what is dubbed the permanent bureaucracy: the military, the courts and other unelected guardians of the

conservative bloc.

Gothom, the Mahidol professor, said that Thailand may see peace now, but that it will likely be a peace enforced by military power.

"How much or how little freedom of expression will be allowed to the people, we will just have to wait and see," he said.

- (With AP inputs)