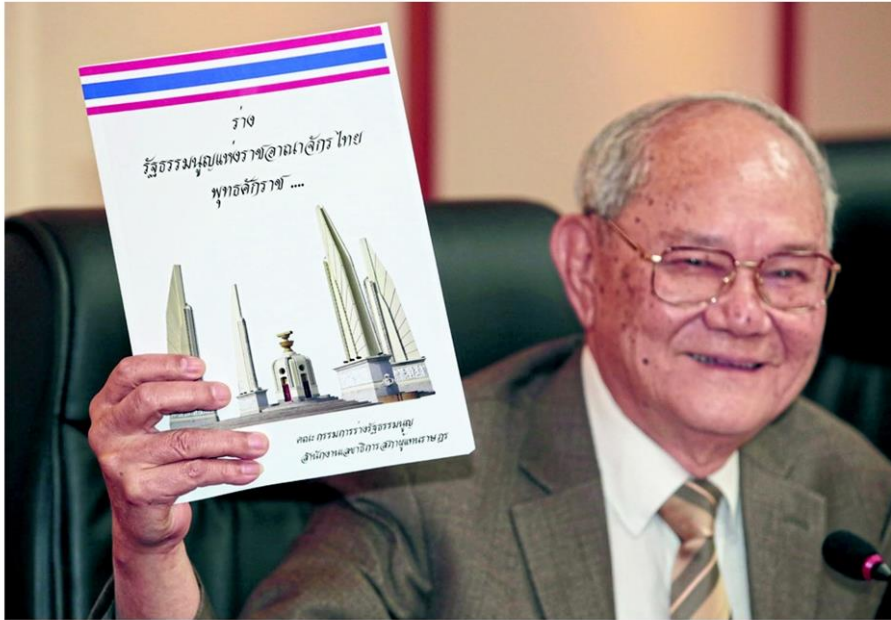


Military holds strong hand in referendum fight



Constitution Drafting Committee chairman Meechai Ruchupan unveils the final draft. With support from state mechanisms, many believe the new draft charter will be approved in the public referendum. BANGKOK POST PHOTO



'Matichon Weekly'

Thai Pulse

What's hot in Thai newspapers and social media

Compiled by ATIYA ACHAKULWISUT

Thai politics is gearing up for the next landmark event, the charter referendum on Aug 7, according to *Matichon Weekly*.

The Constitution Drafting Committee (CDC) headed by Meechai Ruchupan will join hands with state agencies to explain the draft charter to the public, said the article entitled "Referendum: Done".

It expressed confidence the draft will "sail through the referendum".

Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha does not seem completely satisfied with the draft law that was unveiled last week.

In an interview, he said he was okay with attempts to tackle corruption and good governance but indicated the content still did not strike at the heart of his concerns.

Considering the PM's viewpoint, there are two possible scenarios for the draft charter.

First, the government can let it proceed to the referendum naturally. If it fails the public vote, Gen Prayut still has an option of picking one of

the previous charters and enacting it to allow an election.

"That may be an option with which he will be 100% happy," the article said.

A downside of this option is the failure of the draft at the referendum will have a negative impact on the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) and the government.

The failure may also provoke a call for the NCPO and government to take responsibility, a sentiment that is vulnerable to being manipulated to stir up chaos, the article said.

The other option is to push for the draft constitution to be approved in the referendum.

Even though Gen Prayut finds the law fails to hit home completely, it carries enough mechanisms to ensure the military regime's continued influence.

"All things considered, the NCPO and government should opt for the second option and make concerted efforts to ensure the draft charter wins the vote," the article said.

If the military regime decides to campaign

for a yes vote, it will hold a tremendous advantage over the critics in terms of its ability to persuade the public.

The public referendum law, to be overseen by the Election Commission, ensures campaigns and debates related to the draft charter will come under the NCPO's authority.

Opponents of the draft charter will not be able to campaign freely, the article said.

The powers-that-be also enjoy support from state mechanisms that work closely with the public. They would be enlisted to help the regime's persuasion campaigns.

The regime appears ready to implement harsh measures to ensure it gets its way.

New measures to contain people who stand in the way have been unveiled. A "training course" for politicians who criticise the draft charter or express hostility towards the government is one such measure.

Pheu Thai politicians Worachai Hema and Wattana Muangsook are cases in point as both were "invited" for "attitude adjustment" sessions with the military which included a few days' detention.

"The suppression is set to intensify," the article said.

Charging a woman in Chiang Mai with sedition for posting on Facebook a photo of herself with a red plastic bowl given by former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra is one example.

"The case reflects a willingness to apply a strong deterrent and suppress opponents ruthlessly," the article said.

The NCPO's order giving soldiers powers to summon, arrest and detain people suspected of being engaged in criminal activities will further cause difficulties for people who would like to campaign against the draft charter.

As for political parties, Pheu Thai is the only one that has shown an anti-draft charter stance.

The Democrat Party and other medium and small-sized parties remain ambivalent towards it.

"It is possible these parties view mechanisms installed in the draft charter as being meant to curb the power of Pheu Thai," the article said.

"These functions may have an affect on them but not as much as they do to Pheu Thai. The new rules might turn out to be useful in creating a new political order as well. For these reasons, the other parties could opt to stay above the fray," the article said.

All things considered, some observers have already indicated the draft charter is likely to be approved in the referendum, the story said.

Single ballot 'not fair'

It's unfortunate CDC chairman Meechai Ruchupan does not take into account criticism of the draft charter's demand for a

single ballot for the poll, an editor's note in *Siam Rath Weekly* says.

The single ballot means votes for constituency MPs will be recalculated to determine a quota for each party's party list vote.

Before, people voted separately for constituency MPs and party list representatives in



'Siam Rath Weekly'

two ballots.

The single-ballot idea faces objections not only by the two biggest political parties, Pheu Thai and the Democrats, but also by people within the military regime itself and academics.

Kamnoon Sithisamarn, a member of the National Reform Steering Assembly (NRSA) appointed by the regime, said voters have been familiar with two separate ballots since the 1997 charter took effect.

He said the two-ballot system gives candidates from small and new parties which



NRSA member Lertrat Rattanawanich believes the single ballot system will limit voters' choice. SEKSAN ROJJANAMETAKUL

might not have enough resources to field many constituency MPs a chance to win some seats on the party list.

The single-ballot system will deprive voters

of new choices. New parties or those with limited financial resources stand no chance under the voting method as votes for party list MPs can only be obtained from those for constituency ones.

Another NRSA member, Gen Lertrat Rattanawanich, said the single ballot system will limit voters' choice.

Those who vote for a constituency MP candidate may not support his party, he said. However, voters have no chance to vote for the party of their choice under the system.

He added that all nine countries that employ the mixed-member proportional representation system to calculate the number of party-list MPs — the method preferred by the new draft charter — rely on the use of two ballots.

Banjerd Singkaneti, from National Institute of Development Administration, said the CDC's claim the single-ballot system will prompt parties to field only good candidates for the poll is unreasonable.

He said parties will field candidates who stand to win the most votes.

The single ballot has no bearing on their selection criteria, he said.

An opinion poll by Bangkok University recently revealed a majority of respondents (54%) believe two ballots should be employed for a general election.

"People are wondering whether the CDC was paying attention to what the public wants," the article said.

Distrust might win the day

The draft charter will be endorsed in the public referendum if voters share the NCPO's distrust of politicians, predicts Thepchai Yong in his column in *The Nation Weekly*.

Criticism the draft constitution is undemocratic is not relevant as the NCPO is now geared towards the charter referendum, Mr Thepchai said.

If Gen Prayut says the draft charter is okay, then it's what he wanted.

"Looking back, we will see Gen Prayut has never promised the NCPO will recreate fully-fledged democracy, the kind that lets elected politicians run the show," Mr Thepchai said.

In fact, he has always insisted there must be some mechanisms [in the charter] that allow the NCPO to control the situation or the May 22 coup will have gone to waste.

Gen Prayut says an election will be held next year according to the roadmap. He has never said, however, the poll will lead the country back to full-scale democracy.

So it is no surprise the NCPO wants a wholly appointed Senate to serve as a tool during the first five years to control elected representatives.

"The only reason for the NCPO to keep control over politicians is it does not trust them," Mr Thepchai said.

"Indeed, the military regime has never believed that elected representatives will be



'The Nation Weekly'



Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha has promised an election next year, but not a fully-fledged democracy. THANARAK KHUNTON

able to bring peace and stability to the country."

In the NCPO's eyes, politicians will always have their own interests at heart, so it cannot afford to let them have as much power as before.

With all senators to be approved by the NCPO and armed forces leaders to serve as senators by default, there is no doubt who will control power in parliament.

"Although politicians will be most affected by the draft charter, they have yet to say what type of democracy they would like to propose if they don't want the NCPO's kind," Mr Thepchai said.



He said it will be too selfish for politicians to say they want to return to old-style of democracy and demand the military stop interfering in politics.

He said for now, it's certain the NCPO will keep its influence for at least five more years. Whether it will be five years of power wrangling or change, nobody can tell, he said.

What is clear, however, is the Meechai draft charter will only sail through the referendum if voters distrust politicians like the NCPO, he said.

Contact Thai Pulse: atiyaa@bangkokpost.co.th