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Time to lift rights bans

The best thing that can be said about last week's action by the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) is that the all-male group understands it has created a problem. It has returned to the public a tiny bit of the civil and human rights it removed 52 months ago. On Friday, Prime Minister Prayut Chan-ocha used his extraordinary powers under Section 44 to give some small but important freedoms to political parties. While the order restores the right to organise party affairs, it falls lamentably short of restoring basic and constitutional rights to all Thais.

The main parties gave a cautious welcome to Gen Prayut's order. It legalised, for the first time since the coup of May 22, 2014, action by parties to — in the words of the order printed in the *Royal Gazette* — “conduct important activities ahead of the election”, which still has no date. Those activities are vital. They include organising party membership and chapters, and preparing for the country's first primary elections. In addition, the Election Commission itself is now legally entitled to redraw national constituency lines to account for new, smaller House of Representatives to be eventually elected.

Even this is parsimonious. According to Gen Prayut's order in the name of his NCPO, party leaders and executives cannot legally provide members or the public with even their most basic platform and policies. Parties are allowed to recruit members, under the new freedom, and even can give dis-

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counts of up to 50% of the required 100-baht membership fee. That raises the obvious question of why people would join a political party without knowing its policies and election platform.

If what the prime minister and junta have granted seems ungener-

ous, consider what basic rights remain completely banned. Political parties can hold general assemblies of more than five people, so long as they get permission five days in advance. But they can't hold public rallies. They can't meet outdoors. And again, they can't discuss what policies the party should present to voters to try to win the election.

This easing of the May, 2014, junta order has no effect on the public. The limits on free speech remain in their entirety. Meetings of more than four people to discuss, debate, propose or protest against political decisions remain banned. Needless to say, it is still the military-imposed law that no anti-government, anti-junta or anti-military activity is to be countenanced. It should not be forgotten that during the NCPO's period in power, a new law requires permits and signed permission to make legal any public gathering of any kind.

When Gen Prayut and the junta took control of government and all security apparatus, they justified limits on civil rights and a total ban on political activity on the need for public order. The public, quite reluctantly, accepted this reasoning. While the junta's orders crossed the acceptable boundary, it was true that the country was tense and public safety had been at risk for many months.

None of this applies today. In particular, the NCPO should end its obsession with online discussions. Its constant searches for those who “like” or “share” social media posts should end. A single day after the NCPO's announcement of a continuing ban on social media campaigning by parties, the Bangkok Poll showed a clear plurality of Thais want this ban lifted immediately.

The NCPO was certainly correct to partially lift a tiny part of the ban on political activities by recognised parties. But that is not nearly what the current situation calls for. Members of Gen Prayut's ruling establishment have no reason to maintain limits on basic and constitutionally protected rights of speech, peaceful gatherings, the media and online activities. They should lift those limits immediately.