

NEW THAI CONSTITUTION INCREASES POLITICAL ACTIVITY

The new Thai constitution will almost certainly usher in a period of heightened political activity, but it is not likely to result soon in major changes in the government.

Nine years in the writing, the constitution promulgated by King Phumiphon on 20 June is an expression of the military oligarchy's desire to accommodate pressure for political change while maintaining itself in power. The constitution provides for an independent executive, chosen by the King with what will undoubtedly prove to be the close supervision of the present leaders, and a bicameral legislature having carefully circumscribed powers. The upper house, which will have a de facto veto over legislation, will be chosen by the King.

The constitution provides for lower house elections within eight months, and the government has recently announced the formation of an as yet unnamed political party with Prime Minister Thanom at its head. Although progress in organizing the government party has been slow, the fragmented nature of the opposition and the considerable power at the disposal of the government should permit it to control the lower house with little difficulty.

Leftist politicians almost immediately attempted to use the new constitution to challenge

existing laws curtailing civil liberties. Apparently acting in concert with student leaders, the politicians managed to stage a large and well-organized student demonstration on 21 June to back up their demands for legal reforms. The demonstration, the first in Bangkok since the 1957 coup, surprised Thai authorities, who have long taken student docility for granted, but they managed to control it adroitly.

The demonstration will almost certainly be viewed by some ruling elements as a confirmation of their worst fears, and it will increase the resolve of the military establishment to monitor carefully the liberalizing process. Deputy Prime Minister Praphat, long a foe of political change, has stated that martial law will remain in effect despite promulgation. Prime Minister Thanom, who characteristically blamed the student outbreak on "outsiders," has indicated that the government will take steps to ensure there is no recurrence.

Even if the government is successful in keeping opposition elements under wraps, the resumption of open political activity will raise a number of domestic problems embarrassing to the leadership. Bangkok's relations with the US and the large number of US military personnel in Thailand are almost certain to become political issues.