

Thailand 1968

NEW THAI CONSTITUTION SETS STAGE FOR POLITICAL CHANGE

The ruling military leadership of Thailand has taken a major step toward a return to limited constitutional government.

The appointed national assembly unanimously approved the draft constitution on 22 February, the final legislative action of a drafting process begun nine years ago. The document must now be formally inscribed for the King's signature, the only remaining requirement for promulgation.

The regime's decision to go ahead with the constitution apparently represented a growing belief that promulgation was inevitable and that stalling tactics could not continue indefinitely. Although there was no widespread popular pressure for the constitution, influential civilians in the country favor political liberalization and the government felt some need to legitimize its rule. In addition, the constitution is viewed by some of the current leaders as both window dressing for Thailand's image abroad and as a potentially useful tool for countering Communist propaganda in the countryside.

The constitution provides for a nationwide legislative

election eight months after promulgation, but Prime Minister Thanom has already warned that the elections may be postponed. Although the powers of the elected lower house are carefully circumscribed, the military leaders have expressed some reluctance to go ahead with possibly disruptive elections in the face of a persistent Communist insurgency. Their reluctance is probably also prompted by slow progress in forming a government-sponsored party.

Promulgation will add to an already increasing level of political activity in civilian circles, however, and may create pressure for early elections. Even if it is unable to stall on the elections, the government has made clear that it intends to keep a tight rein on political activity. It will probably not hesitate to seize on real or alleged security "threats" to slow down the liberalization process.

The wording of the constitution and the power realities in Thailand virtually ensure the continuing control of the current leadership group. Nascent political forces may be set in motion, however, which will in time challenge the almost total dominance over Thailand's political life currently enjoyed by the military leadership.