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THAIS BEGIN PREPARATIONS FOR ELECTIONS NEXT YEAR

The Thai military regime is making preparations to dominate next year's legislative elections although it has not yet settled differences within its own ranks.

Deputy Prime Minister Praphat appears to be playing an increasingly active political role. Praphat is managing an effort by the ruling military regime to emasculate the Democratic Party, the only currently active opposition group with significant support in the country. He is promoting an independent slate of candidates for the Bangkok municipal elections in September in order to draw conservative but antigovernment votes away from the Democrats and to clear the way for a government-sponsored ticket. The government hopes that a defeat in Bangkok, where Democratic support is strongest, will virtually destroy the party's electoral chances in next year's country-wide legislative elections.

Praphat's machinations may also be designed to further his own political ambitions. He not only expects to get the credit for defeating the Democrats in September, but he evidently is making plans to pick up the pieces. Praphat recently assumed control of a government-supported political group. He has flatly told his followers that he intends to use the group as a vehicle for a

country-wide political organization, which presumably will be responsive to his direction.

The extent to which Praphat's plans dovetail with the government's is not entirely clear. Although a number of preliminary steps have been taken to organize a party for next year's election, it is clear that the differences within the ruling establishment have not yet been ironed out. Praphat's actions may be in behalf of those hard-line elements in the government who fought against the constitution and are now apparently trying to ensure that their faction will dominate the new government.

The military leaders are displaying considerable sensitivity to political requirements in an election year. A highly unpopular bus fare increase was recently rescinded, and the mayor of Bangkok, whose unsavory reputation is a major political liability, has been kept out of public view.

Meanwhile, both right- and left-wing opposition groups appear to be making only desultory efforts to organize parties for next year's elections. At this juncture, they appear to be more interested in making deals with the government than in actively challenging it at the polls.