



Smooth polls mark Thailand referendum, albeit with lingering concerns

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Thailand's military-drafted constitution was the subject of generally peaceful and smooth polling on Sunday. ANFREL congratulates the people of Thailand for participating in this important electoral exercise. Similarly, the hard work of polling station officials deserves to be recognized for ensuring an efficient and professionally managed referendum.

However, the significant restrictions imposed on discussing the constitution prior to voting may have affected the outcome of the vote, a question for which we may never have a definitive answer. The severe restrictions on freedom of expression and the prohibitions imposed by the junta on public discussions of the draft constitution greatly limited the information available to voters. In the build-up to the referendum, civil society organizations and ordinary citizens were fearful of repercussions from the authorities if they tried to raise their voices or question the merits of provisions of the constitution. Such an environment where voters were denied their right to participate in the process freely and without fear of potential retribution clearly violated international principles of freedom of expression, assembly and association. Such an intimidating environment is inconsistent with universally accepted democratic principles and values for conducting a referendum/election.

ANFREL observers who were in the field on Sunday acknowledged the openness of the process which took place at the polling stations on election day itself. Polling staff allowed members of the public to witness polling and ballot counting. Nevertheless, the presence of regular election monitors would have certainly strengthened the entire process and enhanced its overall credibility.

The modest turnout of voters was not surprising given the limited access to information about the polling process and the contents of the lengthy draft constitution. Moreover, it did not go unnoticed that government resources were utilized to promote support for the junta-drafted document. The climate of uncertainty over the entire process that prevailed in the run-up to the referendum may also have contributed to the lack of interest among many eligible voters who declined to vote.

ANFREL believes it important to properly assess the entire process so as to be able to address the legitimate concerns about the lack of freedom of expression that greatly inhibited debate on the merits and demerits of the constitution. If such concerns are left unaddressed, then the legitimacy of the process, especially as it was undertaken in a climate of fear and the government's one-sided campaign, will continue to be disputed. ANFREL strongly recommends that the Election Commission of Thailand and other relevant government agencies ensure that, in the future, the overall process in an electoral cycle - pre-polling, polling, post-polling - comply with universally accepted standards of free, fair and credible elections.

Finally, ANFREL firmly believes that the process of reconciliation and meaningful dialogue among major political factions is possible only through broad participation in free and credible elections. Therefore, ANFREL urges Thai authorities to hold elections soon in order to ensure the lasting peace, political stability, and economic prosperity of the country.

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