

Thailand's constitution draft assembly passes new charter

Thailand's Constitution Drafting Assembly Friday unanimously approved an amended version of the country's new charter, moving it closer to a referendum planned on August 19.

The assembly's 98 members who voted in the Thai parliament approved the draft of Thailand's 17th constitution, which has been under debate for the past two months.

'We will print 19 million copies of the draft charter to distribute to all districts in Thailand to allow people to study it before the August 19 referendum,' assembly chairman Noranit Sethabutr said.

Many of the most contentious articles in the new charter were modified during the revision process. For instance, an article stipulating that senators must be appointees now states that of the 150 senators, 76 would be elected and 74 selected.

A push to include Buddhism as Thailand's state religion failed although Article 78 now says, 'The state shall provide patronage and protection to Buddhism, to which the majority of Thais profess, and to other faiths.'

The draft also contains some articles that make it more liberal than its predecessor, the 1997 charter, which was deemed Thailand's most liberal to date.

For instance, Article 30 in the draft grants equality before the law for gays and transsexuals, stating: 'Females and males as well as those with other gender identities shall enjoy equal rights.'

In a show of appreciation, about 100 people of the 'third sex' had planned to present the assembly with a bouquet of flowers Friday morning, but they cancelled the presentation because of anti-charter protests surrounding the Parliament building.

'We are gay, so we don't like violence,' said Natee Theerrojnapong, leader of the Bangkok Rainbow Organization. He praised the draft charter for providing transsexuals with equal rights in Thailand for the first time.

'Hereafter, if we are discriminated against, we can take the case to court,' Natee said.

About 1,000 members of the Democratic Alliance Against Dictatorship gathered in front of the parliament Friday morning to protest the new charter and call for the return of the 1997 constitution, which was annulled after the September 19, 2006 military coup.

The coup ousted former premier Thaksin Shinawatra on charges of corruption and dividing the nation. Many blamed loopholes in the 1997 charter for allowing Thaksin, a billionaire businessman turned populist politician, to gain near monopolistic control over Thailand's political apparatus during his premiership from 2001 to 2006.

The new draft of the constitution has strengthened the checks and balances against the executive branch, analysts said.

The military has promised to return power to the people in an election scheduled on November 25

after the constitution is approved in the referendum next month.

If the referendum votes against the new charter, the military holds the power to select one of Thailand's old constitutions instead.

Thailand has already had 16 constitutions since 1932, when a group of Young Turk officers overthrew the absolute monarchy and turned the country into a democracy under a constitutional monarchy.

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