



Government House of Thailand, offices of the prime minister and the cabinet of Thailand/BT

BANGKOK – After a series of long delays and broken promises, Thailand’s military government has enacted laws that set in motion a countdown leading to new elections by next May.

The measures, which became law Wednesday with their publication in the Royal Gazette, cover selection of members of Parliament and senators.

The act covering lower house lawmakers becomes effective in 90 days and mandates that elections be held within 150 days after that, effectively setting a legal deadline in May.

Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-Ocha, who heads the regime that seized power in a 2014 coup, said last month that a general election was likely to be held on Feb. 24, but left open the possibility of a later date.

The ruling junta has previously set dates for elections but then postponed them.

There are to be 500 lawmakers in the lower house, while the 250 senators will all be appointed.

Thailand’s latest constitution, pushed through by the military government, is designed to limit the power of political parties, with election rules designed to keep any single party from winning a clear majority, and gives the Senate more powers than in previous charters.

The rules are mostly meant to curb the political machine of former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, whose populist policies won him enormous support and threatened the influence of traditional power holders, including the military. He was deposed by a 2006 military coup, but his following remained strong. His sister Yingluck Shinawatra became prime minister in 2011, only to have her government in 2014 also toppled by the army.

Prayuth, who led the 2014 military takeover, has been coy about whether he wants to serve as prime minister again after the election but has been making campaign-like appearances around the country while his backers have lined up support from influential politicians.

Political gatherings of five or more people were banned by the junta after it seized power, effectively forcing all political parties into dormancy while the junta quashed dissent and consolidated its rule.

Late last month, the junta announced it would ease some restrictions on political parties to let them conduct basic functions and prepare for elections set for early next year, but campaigning would remain forbidden for the time being.

Prayuth said the new rules would allow political parties to hold meetings, make adjustments to regulations, appoint managers and accept new members ahead of the polls.

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