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Opinion

Junta must heed people's reform advice

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Somewhere down the road, and probably sooner than expected given the pressures and demands, Thailand's military rulers must consider how to prepare the country for a return to democracy.

Right now, the thinking is that the process of appointing a legislative assembly to draft a new constitution will take another three to four months, just in time to approve a budget for the country by October. Meanwhile, it has been announced that a panel will hear the views of all stakeholders as a step towards framing national reforms.

There is an urgent need to set the goals of political reform in consultation with all elements of society to ensure a popular consensus and prevent another senseless cycle of protest and upheaval. But for these reforms to be meaningful and long lasting, it is just as important to design a process that sensibly integrates the elements of political reform, reconciliation and national elections, and makes sure as well that the views of everyone are heard from the bottom up.

Thailand has experienced this kind of transition before. In 1996, Thais from all levels of society across the country participated in consultations to decide on the elements of a new constitution that was promulgated in 1997. Why take a backward step and impose a new political order without consulting with the people?

Those who support the military intervention last month would argue that the difference between 1997 and today, is that society is polarised and divided, prone to conflict and incapable of forging a national consensus. True, there does need to be a cooling off period, and the potential to resort to armed violence defused.

But the military planners running the country are hoping that under their tutelage, a new political system will be fashioned, ensuring cleaner, more predictable political outcomes. There is speculation this could mean more appointed and fewer elected legislators. Or, perhaps a system of voting for an electoral college that then selects who will run the country indirectly.

However, there should be no question about the need for broader discussions about the substance of political reforms. Thai society is mature enough to embrace this debate without the threat of polarisation. There is, in fact, no real argument about many of the key areas of reform — fair elections, free of corruption, greater regional autonomy and stronger checks and balances on the abuse of power.

The reform process can be led by a team of experts and managed from above, but it must be inclusive and take into account the views of all. Anyone appointed to make changes must swiftly turn their decisions over to popular scrutiny and endorsement.

In the absence of an elected parliament, a referendum would be an ideal vehicle to endorse the changes, followed immediately by an election. The reformers must also take advice on what the immediate, medium and long-term priorities are and manage popular expectations about what can be delivered sooner rather than later.

Although there is a long tradition in Southeast Asia of leaving important decisions affecting society to leaders and accepting what is handed down from above, times have changed. People want their views about how they wish to be governed taken into account. They have grown accustomed to changing governments using votes, and if their votes are not counted, then taking to the streets in protest.

And so even if the military junta that now governs Thailand decides it cannot risk an early return to popular sovereignty, which seems likely, it must find ways of ensuring that the people are consulted and their views are heard. First, representatives from all political factions and constituencies need to be appointed to the proposed reform council. It is critical that the power-holders — in this case the military — find an individual who is acceptable to all sides to lead the process. Previous efforts at reform and reconciliation these past few years have all been dismissed because they were seen as controlled by those in power.

One way to address this shortcoming is for the council to accept the views of independent academic experts and enlist relevant technical advice, whether it comes from within Thailand's capable academic establishment, or from outside. Finally, whatever the reform council decides should be the future political framework must be aired in public and criticisms heard and taken on board.

After almost a decade of bruising political conflict, there will also be the need for a process of reconciliation. It is impossible to force opposing parties and factions to bury their differences using the threat of persecution and legal sanction. National healing requires a coming to terms with the truth, and a willingness of all sides to bury their differences in the interest of national unity and peace.

This may be particularly hard for a society that places so much emphasis on individual dignity and face, but the experience of the past decade in Thailand suggests that victims of violence

are ready to confront the truth of what happened to them and their loved ones, so long as there is the political will and fair legal recourse to support adequate remedial measures.

Much can be learned from the experience of other countries. For Thailand is not unique. Those in power almost always seek to forge reforms that serve narrow interests rather than those of the majority, and reconciliation in polarised; violence-affected societies are never a walk in the park. Imaginative and equitable leadership is usually key.

The qualities of leadership Thailand needs today include the courage to listen to what people want and tolerate the differences of view that inevitably exist in complex societies.

Thailand's military rulers might think they know what is best for the country. They should be bold enough to provide the space for inclusive dialogue and popular choice before deciding what direction the country takes.

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