

## Still no rest for politicians

Behind The Headlines by Bunn Nagara



***Thailand's complex politics grows ever more complicated, again producing more questions and problems than answers or solutions.***

FOR Thailand, the week had begun with an earthquake that rocked the northern provinces, with dire warnings of possibly worse tremors to come.

Last Monday's quake, with its epicentre in Chiang Rai, had measured 6.3 on the Richter scale. The Engineering Institute of Thailand said even stronger aftershocks could follow days later.

What did follow on Wednesday was the man-made quake of Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra's dismissal by the Constitutional Court, along with nine of her Cabinet ministers, with immediate effect.

As the main fault line runs from the Shinawatra family's stronghold in the northern provinces to their adversaries' base in Bangkok, the political aftershocks are bound to be much graver.

The latest round of anti-Shinawatra protests, aimed against the continuing influence of former premier and convicted billionaire fugitive Thaksin Shinawatra, is now into its seventh month after street demonstrations against his sister's government broke out last November.

Controversy piled onto controversy as Yingluck's government tried to bulldoze through a Bill granting amnesty to Thaksin that would let him return without serving his two-year sentence for corruption.

The Bill was approved by Parliament where government-friendly MPs were a majority, but it was stopped by the Senate.

In December, Bangkok's crisis edged up another notch as Yingluck dissolved Parliament and called a snap general election for February.

Two days after her move, former opposition Democrat Party MP Suthep Thaugsuban resigned to lead massive street protests against the caretaker government.

The idea of a general election was clearly a non-starter, since the government's opponents had vowed to reject it, block electoral procedures and ignore the results.

The Opposition felt it could not win, owing to allegedly improper inducements that Thaksin could bankroll. Thus the Feb 2 election came and went as a formality, with Yingluck remaining a "Caretaker Prime Minister" months after that.

Since Thai law withholds recognition of any election result comprising less than 95% of returns, protesters made sure that considerably less than that proportion of voting precincts could operate.

Despite the February election becoming an exercise in futility, Yingluck's Pheu Thai Party still looked to elections as it was confident it could secure the results it wanted.

Meanwhile, her caretaker premiership was wearing out its tenure after an election, and the protesters were growing restless. A Shinawatra government seemed to be overstaying yet again.

Thaksin loyalists allege that establishment institutions like the Constitutional Court are stacked against the family and its interests.

The courts work with reference to a 2006 Constitution drafted after Thaksin was toppled in a military coup earlier that year.

In the event, the Constitutional Court during the week found Yingluck and nine of her ministers guilty of abuse of power by improperly replacing the head of the National Security Council with a Shinawatra relative.

Another likely charge is improper handling of a rice-pledging scheme guaranteeing farmers in the Shinawatras' northern strongholds an inflated price for their crop.

Legal action on that front may yet follow by way of Yingluck's impeachment, which would ban her from politics for five years.

In the meantime, after much agitation and angst, the Pheu Thai-led governing coalition has seen a changing of the guard.

Caretaker Commerce Minister Niwatthamrong Boonsongpaisan has replaced Yingluck, as the post of Caretaker Prime Minister is replaced by that of Acting Caretaker Prime Minister.

More than half of Yingluck's ministers remain in their posts. Things could have been worse, of course, for Pheu Thai if not also for Thailand as a whole: the entire Cabinet could have been dismissed, plunging the country into an even deeper abyss.

However, that prospect would have been the hoped-for ideal of Suthep and his supporters. Anti-Thaksin protesters want nothing short of a wholesale change of government, with immediate effect, and that outside the process of any election.

Street protesters want a complete change of government rather than a change of some faces in the Cabinet. They are pressing for an "interim government" in a matter of days.

Suthep's PDRC (People's Democratic Reform Committee) recognises only the president of the Supreme Court and the Senate speaker as the legitimate government authorities left. It wants these officials to establish a new government in place of Niwatthamrong's government, whatever it calls itself.

Instead of pacifying the protesters, Yingluck's dismissal has so far only emboldened them in making further demands. They have resolved to "seize" television stations and set up camp in front of Government House and Bangkok's main shopping and business district.

Further plans include another major demonstration next Wednesday. That coincides with a planned massive rally by Pheu Thai supporters on the same day, raising the prospect of violent street clashes.

Pheu Thai and its allies are still pushing for a new election, just as much as the PDRC is dead set against it – particularly before reforms are made. Even the process of declaring a general election has become deeply contentious.

A government opponent in the Senate on Thursday objected to Niwatthamrong naming a date for the next election as he was not empowered to do so. A Pheu Thai legal expert rebutted that point, arguing that an Acting Caretaker Prime Minister was as empowered as a Prime Minister.

As Thailand's crisis gathers momentum, growing numbers outside the country watch ever more intently. Fellow Asean member nations in the neighbourhood are concerned, but are still keeping their thoughts to themselves.

The US has appealed for a peaceful resolution to the disputes. UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, in another futile effort likely to confirm his ineffectiveness, has called for all parties to “seek a solution through constructive dialogue”.

So far, only megaphone monologues are in evidence, and very much in abundance. The kind of gentle observances that many have come to associate with “the land of smiles” now seem to belong to a very distant land.

Democrat Party leader Abhisit Vejjajiva has offered that if Pheu Thai accepts his proposal to resolve the crisis, he would keep away from future elections. That initiative has been criticised as offering too little too late.

Abhisit also seems to be missing the point. To the noisy protesters on the streets, the issue is not Abhisit or his colleagues staying out of politics but Thaksin and his family.

Through it all, Thailand’s economy is taking a steady if slow beating. Although some reports say foreign investors are still relatively unmoved by the crisis, Thai investors themselves are increasingly moving to countries like Indonesia, Myanmar and Vietnam.

At the same time, general standards of living are slipping further behind countries like Singapore and Malaysia. Consumer complaints abound, particularly when daily life is increasingly disrupted by protests in public places.

Banks and other financial institutions find new investments have slowed or stopped. Issues like productivity and prospective inflation have moved to the fore, and Moody’s Investor Service called the Constitutional Court ruling “credit negative”.

However, the week also saw an international report, Save the Children’s 2015 Mothers’ Index, moving Thailand up eight places to 72nd position out of 178 countries.

Thailand apparently is still a good place to be for a mother.

But that is a different matter altogether for some single mothers, particularly those dabbling in politics on behalf of a politically estranged brother.

***Bunn Nagara is a Senior Fellow at the Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) Malaysia***