

Established 1946

# Bangkok Post

THE NEWSPAPER YOU CAN TRUST

## Act now and save yourself

**D**espite its victory in last month's no-confidence motion, the coalition government under Gen Prayut Chan-o-cha is experiencing heavy political turbulence with public confidence taking a nosedive.

Less than a month after the debate, calls for a cabinet reshuffle and even Gen Prayut's resignation are becoming louder, especially after a series of scandals by cabinet members and their aides.

Some scandals, especially those related to the Covid-19 outbreak which started in December, are the result of incompetency and weak leadership that is making the war against the dreaded virus that much more complicated. Others seem to suggest foul play and misuse of connections with those in power. Such irregularities have rattled the Prayut cabinet as public acceptance is running low.

The grilling and no-confidence votes revealed Deputy Agriculture Minister Thamanat Prompow — with his infamous past — as the coalition's weakest link. He only won 269 out of 331 votes, the lowest of the six ministers.

Then emerged allegations against his close aide of hoarding face masks, which has further deepened public disappointment given the shortage of this much-needed item among those who need it the most — medical personnel. This has fuelled public anger, which Thamanat was not able to staunch by his unconvinc-

ing denials.

At this point, it is necessary for Gen Prayut to ensure the investigation into the face-mask hoarding allegation is transparent and those in the wrong get due punishment. The army-chief-turned politician should also learn that keeping a controversial person like Thamanat in his cabinet will make his government vulnerable. Pressure will increase outside parliament, with protests by the opposition and student activists gaining steam. Yet PM Prayut remains evasive.

According to media reports, some key Democrat Party members became uneasy with the situation and signalled they were "out" while the debate was focusing on Thamanat's scandals.

Though Gen Prayut initially challenged the coalition partner to go ahead and exit, he eventually relented and offered an olive branch.

As for the reshuffle idea, he only came up with a lukewarm "when the time is right" response. Gen Prayut obviously wants to show he can control the situation. But can he?

Last week, the premier tried to polish his image by opening his office to some grassroots people. However, such staged meetings will do little when his cabinet is weak and flawed.

A recent Nida poll showed the public has placed trust in the opposition performing its checks and balances role. Gen Prayut should pay heed to this. More than 50% of respondents gave credit to the opposition for providing vital information when grilling targeted ministers, especially on Thamanat's questionable past, which the minister failed to clear up convincingly.

Despite the opposition becoming weaker after the dissolution of the Future Forward Party shortly before the censure debate, nearly 60% of poll respondents said they still trusted the bloc to scrutinise the government effectively.

This is a clear slap in the government's face and the only way Gen Prayut can win public confidence is by removing unfit members of his cabinet.

However, a loose coalition with each party employing tactics to maximise personal gains makes a reshuffle a difficult job. But sooner rather than later, Gen Prayut will find it unavoidable because too much is at stake.