

Prayut sends signals to Isan ahead of vote



Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha greets locals in Nakhon Ratchasima on Monday during a mobile cabinet meeting. CHANAT KATANYU

COMMENTARY

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This week's mobile cabinet meeting in Nakhon Ratchasima is not just the routine political junket that it may seem. In fact, it is a key event with several political implications.

This is the third mobile cabinet led by Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-o-cha. The first was held in Hua Hin of Prachuap Khiri Khan in March 2015, followed by the second in Chiang Mai in June 2015.

We can't say this week's meeting is politically motivated but it is indeed a political showcase of the Prayut administration and it comes at a good time for the generals.

First, the event comes just a few days before "judgement day" this Friday when the Supreme Court's Criminal Division for Political Office Holders hands down its ruling in the malfeasance case concerning former prime minister Yingluck Shinawatra.

Ahead of the ruling, soldiers have been sent to "closely monitor" red-shirt activities nationwide, particularly in the North and Northeast.

Some key red-shirt supporters in rural areas have been asked to sign an agreement that they will not mobilise supporters to Bangkok to give moral support to Ms Yingluck.

The authorities have also tried to disrupt financial support and transport facilities arranged for that political purpose.

Nevertheless, a 4,000-strong contingent of officers will be deployed at the court on Friday with "100% law enforcement" to be adopted.

Meanwhile, the mobile cabinet is effectively a showcase of the government. In fact Gen Prayut, in Nakhon Ratchasima, a key red-shirt stronghold. It signifies his success in keeping the red-shirt movement under control.

Second, it's more like a forum where Gen Prayut sends a political message to Isan voters ahead of the general election to be held next year under the government's road map.

While key agenda items concern the approval of multi-billion-baht infrastructure and development projects in the Northeast and issuing land-use rights documents to 6,000 households in 10

northeastern provinces, Gen Prayut also took this opportunity to send a political message to Isan people.

He began with a trust-building tactic, identifying himself with northeasterners, telling them he was born at a military base in Nakhon Ratchasima.

He also kindled the pride of Isan people, saying they were the ones who control the country's fate and called on them to carefully choose the politicians who will govern the country.

One part of his message to the Isan voters is: "It's a time of change. You should all vote, and don't choose the wrong person again."

The premier added that he always supports elections but many "lousy" politicians came to power through elections in the past. This was because some voters failed to exercise their right at the polling station.

Third, the mobile cabinet takes place at a right time when the government has been in power for about three years.

The Prayut cabinet was formed on Aug 31, 2014 and it took office on Sept 4 that year after Gen Prayut led his cabinet to take an oath before King Bhumibol Adulyadej.

After three years governing the country, the government seems unable to handle bread-and-butter problems,

which is harming its popularity.

According to the latest opinion survey, by Bangkok Poll of Bangkok University, held among 1,216 people on the third anniversary of the Prayut Chan-o-cha government, respondents gave the administration an average overall score of 5.27 out of 10, compared to 5.83 and 6.19 after 18 months, and two years in power respectively.

A breakdown showed economic performance remained its weak spot, with a "fail" score of 3.85. The economy was also the area of biggest decline in perceived performance compared to the previous survey.

The mobile cabinet began with multi-billion-baht benefit handouts to provinces and people in the northeastern region, the country's largest and poorest region.

Any politicians who assume Gen Prayut, should he return to politics as an outsider prime minister, will come under their sway following an election, should think again. He is not as politically naive as they might think but in fact a smart political operator.

The government has accomplished some things while in power.

Economic growth in the second half of this year was 3.7% year-on-year, against market expectations of 3.2%. This holds out hope of a better performance for the rest of the year.

What the government needs to do is better distribute wealth, not allowing it to concentrate among those on top of the pyramid of income.

Another survey by the National Institute of Development Administration, or Nida Poll, conducted on Aug 15-17 among 1,250 people, showed the majority still view Gen Prayut's performance in a good light.

Some 30% of respondents rated his performance as very good; 48.7% as good; 12.16% not good at all; 1.76% fairly good; and 2% uncertain.

But Gen Prayut may find cause to celebrate when it comes to public attitudes regarding corruption as shown in the latest survey by Super Poll, conducted during Aug 11-18 among 762 people.

The poll results showed 65.2% of respondents did not accept any corruption even though some would stand to benefit, while 37.8% said they have no objection.

Compared to a survey by Abac Poll of Assumption University in 2013, the year before Gen Prayut toppled the Pheu Thai government in a putsch, 65% of respondents said they could accept corruption if they gained some benefit. Low-income people and farmers made up the biggest groups who said it was acceptable.

Gen Prayut used to note that it is not good for the country if more than one third of the people find corruption acceptable. But the latest figures show an improving trend in people's attitudes against this social ill.

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