

CALLS FOR CABINET RESHUFFLE GROW TO RESTORE CONFIDENCE IN GOVERNMENT

Pressure mounts on Gen Prayut

POST REPORTERS

» Pressure mounted yesterday on Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha to reshuffle his cabinet and bring in more proactive ministers to tackle the economy, as fears mount of harsher financial times and falling confidence in the government.

Politicians and academics warned of growing public impatience with the government's lack of action on the economy, which Gen Prayut acknowledged on Friday when he indicated a reshuffle might be on the cards.

Democrat Party leader Abhisit Vejjajiva said yesterday Gen Prayut has to quickly clarify his position on the cabinet reshuffle.

Yutthaporn Issarachai, vice-rector of Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University, said the prime minister must view a reshuffle as a normal phenomenon, as there were always changing circumstances.

After having avoided discussion of a reshuffle, Gen Prayut on Friday implied it might be on the cards, while insisting no more military officers would be brought into his cabinet.

Speculation of a cabinet shake-up, particularly in economic affairs, to restore public confidence in the government, surfaced last week after the amended interim charter allowing previously banned politicians to become cabinet ministers came into force.

MR Pridiyathorn Devakula is deputy prime minister overseeing economic affairs.

Political observers view the amended interim charter as a way for Somkid Jatusripitak, an economic adviser to the National Council for Peace and Order, to join the cabinet to handle economic affairs.

Mr Somkid has worked closely with the NCPO, but was unable to join the military-ruled cabinet because of the political ban. A well-placed source said last night that Mr Somkid would be appointed as a deputy prime minister.

He was one of the 111 former executives of the defunct Thai Rak Thai Party to be banned in 2007.

Mr Abhisit warned that letting uncertainty linger over the reshuffle would obstruct the work of the government. If there is a reshuffle, the change should be intended primarily to improve the government's efficiency.

He said the government should focus on boosting low purchasing power, particularly of farmers who have been affected by

falling crop prices and the drought.

Addressing this issue should help shore up the country's economy, Mr Abhisit said.

Former Democrat Party MP Warong Dechgitvongrom wrote on his Facebook page that a cabinet reshuffle is "inevitable" considering the myriad problems besetting the country. He said new faces who join the cabinet must have what it takes to gain public acceptance.

As for "a cabinet of unity", which would comprise politicians from the Pheu Thai and Democrat parties to help tackle economic problems, Mr Warong said he could see no reason against it. But the people must be qualified and acceptable to the public, he added.

The proposal was floated by a National Reform Council panel studying approaches to promoting national unity, chaired by Anek Laothammatat.

Pornthep Chuphan, senior director of SCB Securities Co's investment strategy department, said a reshuffle should not affect stock market investment.

He said the private-sector view was that a change in ministers handling economic affairs would have little impact because the government's overall economic policy and state investment projects remain unchanged.

NRC member Wanchai Sornsiri stressed the need for a cabinet shake-up, saying the public was growing impatient with economic problems and the issue could undermine confidence in the government.

Mr Wanchai said cabinet ministers should not cling to their seats. If they are removed, it should not be seen as a disgrace as long as a cabinet change is meant to benefit the country.

Phongthep Thepkanjana, Pheu Thai's former deputy prime minister, yesterday denied reports that he is among the key Pheu Thai members tipped to join the cabinet if there is a reshuffle.

Deputy Prime Minister and Defence Minister Gen Prawit Wongsuwon yesterday rejected talk that he would lose his defence post if a reshuffle takes place.

Gen Prawit's absence from recent government meetings had sparked rumours that he feigned illness because he knew he might be stripped of the post.

Gen Prawit said he has been on sick leave after he took a fall and hurt his arm and leg, which has been put in a splint. Doctors have advised him to rest for two weeks.

"I did have a fall. Who would pretend to do so? That's insane," Gen Prawit said.

Gen Prawit brushed aside reports that Gen Prayut would promote Gen Udomdej Sitabutr, who retires as army chief in September, from deputy defence minister to defence minister, while Gen Prawit would remain only as deputy prime minister.

"That's just a fantasy. There won't be a change in defence minister. I will have to continue to help the prime minister. He won't abandon me halfway through."

In a Bangkok poll conducted by the Research Institute of Bangkok University released yesterday, the majority of respondents (56.3%) agreed that a government of national unity should be set up to carry on with reforms and boost unity after the current government steps down.

The polls questioned 1,117 people nationwide.



PHOTO:THITIWANNAMONTHA

GUEST OF HONOUR: Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha greets the bride and groom at a wedding at the Mandarin Oriental Hotel in Bangkok. The groom is Wapat who is the son of Somkid Jatusripitak, left, an economic adviser to the National Council for Peace and Order.