

The elite cannot turn back the tide of Thai politics Financial Times, May 8, 2014

By Duncan McCargo

When Thailand's counter-corruption agency called for the impeachment of Yingluck Shinawatra on Wednesday, the news had a surreal quality: the prime minister was already gone. The country's conservative establishment, having dithered since November about how to respond to a wave of anti-government street protests, has finally turned on Ms Yingluck's Puea Thai party.

This week the constitutional court removed Ms Yingluck and most of her key ministers from office; the acting administration is struggling for credibility as the remaining members try to cover multiple cabinet roles. In the absence of a foreign minister, no one is sure who will represent Thailand at a meeting of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations this weekend. Consumer confidence is at its lowest level in more than 12 years, and foreign investors are eyeing the country with growing wariness.

For decades Thailand was managed by a "network monarchy" - an alliance of senior bureaucrats and other elders and betters, who worked closely with the palace. Elected governments came and went, growing in power from the 1970s onward, but subject to veto by the Bangkok elite.

All that changed with the arrival of Thaksin Shinawatra, a police officer turned telecommunications magnate - and Ms Yingluck's older brother - who moved into Government House in 2001. Mr Thaksin was the first politician to understand the aspirations of the country's millions of urbanised villagers - people who voted in the provinces but made a living in and around Bangkok. Dismissed by the middle classes as ignorant "buffaloes", urbanised villagers have ensured that pro-Thaksin parties won every election since.

Mr Thaksin was ousted from power in a 2006 military coup but continues to exert considerable influence from his self-imposed exile in Dubai. Thais are divided into two camps: admirers of the former prime minister; and opponents who see him, with some justification, as a manipulative populist who is synonymous with corruption. Even the highest echelons of the Thai state are now split, including senior ranks of the military.

After months of street protests led by Suthep Thaugsuban, a former deputy premier from the opposition Democrat party, anti-Thaksin

forces sense they have the upper hand. They are calling for a mass rally, symbolically set for 9.09am on Friday May 9. This is a coded reference to the long-reigning King Bhumibol Adulyadej, Rama the Ninth, whose legacy the protesters claim to be defending. But this is the 11th time Mr Suthep has called for a “final battle” to oust the Shinawatra clan. He repeatedly urges “the people” (meaning his own groups of supporters) to seize “sovereign power”, as though hot air alone could topple the government.

The increasingly demagogic anti-Thaksin movement is now guilty of many of the same shortcomings it ascribes to Mr Thaksin: it is highly personalised, stubborn and self-interested. The movement – calling itself the People’s Democratic Reform Committee – disrupted a general election held on February 2, which was boycotted by the opposition and subsequently annulled by the courts.

Mr Suthep and the Democrat party have demanded “reform before elections”, pre-emptive and unconstitutional moves intended to curtail the power of ordinary voters and prevent another pro-Thaksin government from coming to power. Unable to triumph at the ballot box, Thailand’s oldest political party has turned against electoral politics. Whether the elections scheduled for July 20 will go ahead remains in doubt.

This latest iteration of Thailand’s nine-year political crisis has been the darkest and most difficult so far. Anti-Thaksin protests, elections, a military coup, a new constitution, judicial interventions, pro-Thaksin protests – all have been tried since 2005, some of them several times, and all have failed. At the root of the problem lies the disputed legitimacy of the Thai state. Is it a constitutional democracy? Or a traditional kingdom in which deference for the monarchy and attachment to notions of what it means to be Thai are more important than either laws or votes?

The latest constitutional court decision to remove Ms Yingluck from power had a tendentious basis in law but a rather more robust extra-legal rationale. The powers that be had finally decided the premier had to go.

For many Bangkokians, the decision of the constitutional court will come as a vindication of their hostility to the Puea Thai government. But there is a vast psychological divide between the metropolitan middle class and the masses registered to vote in the country’s most populous regions.

The conflict is pitting an entrenched elite that is destined to lose power against new political forces whose rise seems inexorable. Ousting Ms Yingluck on a technicality was an act of desperation, not a show of strength.

