

Censure debate could target PM Yingluck
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Charter amendment, reconciliation and debate on 'rice graft' await MPs

A new session of Parliament begins today, with at least three issues looming - constitutional amendment, the reconciliation bill and a no-confidence debate.

The ruling Pheu Thai Party has decided not to rush the charter-amendment process, but as long as it refuses to totally withdraw the amendment draft, which would mean changing the whole supreme law, it will continue to have problems - as political tension will linger.

Pheu Thai spokesman Prompong Nopparit said the party would not push either the charter-change law or the reconciliation bill.

In the meantime, the government has put the Interior Ministry in charge of promoting charter amendment and getting people to "understand" the need to change the 2007 Constitution.

A new issue is the Democrats' proposal to censure the government, but they have yet to say when they will file for the no-confidence debate.

The previous session closed while the third reading of the change to Article 291 of the 2007 Constitution was left on the agenda. After 15 days of debate, a House-Senate meeting passed the second reading of the bill and it was put on hold, according to the requirement by law.

But before Parliament resumed to deliberate the third reading, the Constitution Court asked MPs to hold the discussion. The court acted on complaints that the amendment process, which sought to set up a new drafting assembly, sought to ditch the country's constitutional monarchy system.

The court's decision to drop the case on July 13 did not end the ambiguity surrounding the issue. It said the current charter allows Parliament to change the charter article by article. It also suggested a national referendum could be conducted before rewriting the new charter as a whole.

Opinions are still split, even among Pheu Thai MPs, on what to do with the charter-change process.

Prompong also said the reconciliation bill would be a low priority this House session. And if it is tabled for discussion, debate will be heated.

Proposed by the government and coalition parties, the reconciliation bill has been criticised by opposition MPs as an amnesty law designed to benefit ousted former PM Thaksin Shinawatra.

The Democrats have made it clear they will not allow the reconciliation bill to pass. And now, the opposition party has raised the prospect of a censure motion. It would be the first time Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra has been the target of a no-confidence debate since taking office.

Opposition leader Abhisit Vejjajiva announced shortly after the closure of last session that the Democrats would submit a no-confidence motion as soon as the new parliament opens. The previous meeting was a legislative session, in which only laws could be considered. But a censure debate is allowed in the current session.

The Democrats say that their no-confidence debate would scrutinise the effectiveness of policies put in place by Yingluck administration. Among the programmes expected to come under fire is the rice-mortgage scheme, which is said to be riddled with corruption and threatens Thailand's status as the world's No 1 exporter of rice.

Yingluck said yesterday she is ready to rebut the opposition's censure should a no-confidence motion be filed.

"The opposition is obliged to check on the performance and the government is duty-bound to explain its work via Parliament," she said.

Yingluck said she was uncertain if the opposition would target her or ministers in the censure debate. In regard to speculation about a Cabinet reshuffle, she said she had not had any thoughts yet on the new line-up.

Earlier, Yingluck rarely attended House meetings to answer motions and mostly assigned deputies to answer queries from the opposition.

Observers expect the Democrats to attack inaccurate information given to the public by Yingluck as part of its character-assassination plan during the censure showdown.

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