

Yingluck may take Defence
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Talk of another Cabinet reshuffle has re-emerged, as many politicians from the ruling Pheu Thai Party are meeting with former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra in Hong Kong this week to celebrate his birthday.

Thaksin, who is believed to be pulling the strings behind the government, turns 63 today.

Just a few months after Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra reshuffled her then five-months-old Cabinet for the first time in mid-January, it was rumoured that she would do so again when the five-year ban on 111 former executives from Thaksin's now-defunct Thai Rak Thai Party ended on May 30. Almost two months have passed since that milestone, and the PM has not made it clear whether there will be another ministerial shake-up anytime soon.

As the government leader, it is natural for Yingluck to want to avoid making waves or ruffling feathers. However, it is no secret that she is not the one who has the final say in the government's affairs, despite repeated denials by Yingluck and other government figures.

With mounting pressure from her big brother Thaksin, as well as from certain Cabinet hopefuls in the "Group of 111" and from red-shirt leaders, the prime minister is unlikely to postpone the next Cabinet reshuffle for long.

Some important questions have emerged ahead of the next change in the ministerial line-up.

One of them is whether Yingluck will be Thailand's first female defence minister, having already become its first female prime minister.

The defence minister's seat is often assumed by a retired military general, and only a handful of male civilians have ever served in the post - all of them while also serving as the government head. They include Chuan Leekpai, Samak Sundaravej and Som-chai Wongsawat, the last two of whom were described as Thaksin's proxies.

It has long been rumoured that Yingluck would take up the post of defence minister - with her Cabinet's second and current defence minister, Air Chief Marshal Sukampol Suwannathat, expected to be replaced in the next reshuffle.

The military top brass had reportedly disagreed with the idea of having a female at the head of the Defence Ministry, but the improved ties between the government and the armed forces - as recently reported by Sukampol - may have changed that.

According to sources who learned about an upcoming Cabinet reshuffle from Thaksin's recent meeting with Thai politicians in Hong Kong, Yingluck is going to double up as defence minister, while Sukampol will become a deputy prime minister.

Another question is whether Thaksin's trusted aide Surapong Towichukchaikul, who is foreign minister, will be "rewarded" with a more coveted Cabinet seat after having completed his "mission" that led to prominent countries such as the United States, Japan and the United Kingdom granting Thaksin entry visas.

Earlier, Surapong had the Foreign Ministry reissue a Thai passport for Thaksin, whose travel document was revoked by the previous Democrat-led government due to his fugitive status.

After already having been to Japan and the UK, Thaksin plans to enter the US early next month, according to his legal adviser, Noppadon Pattama.

According to the sources, Surapong is likely to become interior minister, replacing Yongyuth Wichaidit, who now doubles as deputy PM - a position he is expected to keep after the next Cabinet shake-up.

Surapong is viewed as being more efficient than Yongyuth in managing people and implementing orders from higher-ups. "He is good at playing different roles. He is as liquid as water," a source said.

Bhokin Balakula, a legal expert and former House Speaker, is likely to replace Surapong as foreign minister, according to the sources.

When compared to Surapong, Bhokin may appear more credible when there is a need to explain to the international community about the government's constitutional amendment bill and new reconciliation law - the latter being labelled by critics as a bid to whitewash Thaksin's wrongdoings.

Changes in the Cabinet line-up also could help removed ministers avoid being grilled by the opposition in a censure debate after a new parliamentary session begins next Wednesday.

Opposition MPs are unlikely to target Cabinet members who have been removed from their old posts and have just been appointed to new ones. Surapong, who is a possible censure target, is likely to benefit in this regard.

Among other Cabinet seats to be affected in a reshuffle are those under Thaksin's quota.

Transport Minister Charupong Ruangsuwan is likely to be replaced by Pongsak Raktapongpisan, another trusted aide to Thaksin who served in the same post under a Thaksin-led government. Pongsak could also double as a deputy prime minister, while Charupong would remain in the Cabinet.

Education Minister Suchart Tadathamrongvej is expected to be replaced by Chaturon Chaisang, a key figure from the Group of 111 who served in the same post for slightly more than a year in a Thaksin administration. This would mean the Education Ministry is getting another new minister. Under governments led by Thaksin and his proxies, there have been more than 10 education ministers. The latest change took place under the current government in January, which saw Suchart replacing the previous office-holder, Woravat Auapinyakul, who lost his job after only five months.

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