

## Time to act in graft fight

- +

There is a certain irony in the new-found movement by the authorities to combat corruption. Anti-Corruption Day was established in September 2012 by the previous government. Ex-premier Yingluck Shinawatra never received credit for fighting graft effectively — because she didn't. New Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha has said pretty well all there is to say about the issue. Now, he also will be judged solely on his achievements.

But it will be self-defeating for the country to put its faith in any person, including the new prime minister. Gen Prayuth has strong powers, and the will to prevail. But previous leaders have also worked from positions of strength. Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat, the one-time strongman who some compare with Gen Prayuth, personally staged anti-corruption drives.

His campaign was popular. Its effects on the problem were, at best, minimal. Worse, it quickly became clear that the military strongman leading the anti-graft campaign was one of the most corrupt men in Thai history. The questionable morality of his lifestyle and the details of his corruption began to leak out during his tenure as prime minister. After his death, it was found that Sarit had a personal fortune of 2.8 billion baht — equal to one quarter of the national budget, or 600 billion baht in today's currency.

If Gen Prayuth is to have any hope of ridding the country of this pernicious disease, he must first of all overcome the worst part of the corrupted regimes of Sarit and his successor Thanom Kittikachorn. That defect is hypocrisy. Any leader, even Sarit, could talk the talk against corruption. But he could never hope to influence an anti-corruption drive because he failed to walk the walk. Gen Prayuth must make extra efforts to take action against corrupt men in uniform, avoid their company, and show he has no favourites in his anti-graft drive.

Thailand is seen around the world as endemically corrupt, as shown in polls such as that by Transparency International. No thinking citizen would deny such surveys.

In the last week, the media has been highlighting the case of the refurbishment of Government House. It got a special paint job to impress the new prime minister. The new sound system in the building's meeting rooms cost a questionable amount of money — and was installed without public accountability. These are the sort of deals Gen Prayuth must crack down on.

Big business is also a big source of corruption. Some business groups have pledged to fight graft. But there has never been a case when corruption has been exposed and taken to court by business leaders. Denouncing demands for bribes is not enough. The bribe-payer is an equal party to the corruption.

This newspaper has been reporting and writing editorials about corruption at local and national levels since it was founded. That is 68 years of recognising the problem. Corruption is a debilitating and ultimately crippling disease. It is a reason, some say the main reason, why the country has progressed so slowly in adopting full democracy.

Fighting corruption needs a leader and a voice. One hopes Gen Prayuth is up to this part of the task. But an effective battle against this dreadful malady requires a national effort.

No man, no single organisation can make a dent. Certainly no slogan will have an effect until people in all fields,

at all levels, come to the realisation that corruption is simply bad for the nation.