

Thai politics

Go beset a watchman

Scandal swirls around the ruling junta's number two at an awkward moment

TIME is currently of the essence in Thailand. In December a photo of Prawit Wongsuwan, the deputy prime minister, wearing a luxury watch caught the attention of activists. The timepiece appeared to be worth more than \$100,000. How could the general afford such an item on his modest military salary and why had he not mentioned it in the declaration of assets he made on taking office? Since then social-media vigilantes have uncovered pictures of him wearing 25 different watches worth around \$1.2m, including 11 Rolexes. A bad situation was made worse when Mr Prawit lamely explained that he had borrowed them all from friends.

The prime minister, Prayuth Chan-ocha, defended his brother-in-arms last month, saying public and private matters should not be confused. He also said it was up to the National Anti-Corruption Commission to investigate. But the commission has not yet thought it necessary to open a full probe into the affair. Its boss instead helpfully pointed out that, if the watches were the property of others, Mr Prawit, who claimed assets of just over \$2.6m on his form, would not have needed to declare them. (That view suggests that bribing an official is legal, as long as the bribe is a loan.)

Despite such bluster on the general's behalf, the fuss will not go away. This week the director of the polling arm of the National Institute of Development Administration, a government university in Bangkok, announced his resignation. Arnon Sakworawich said he was quitting for "academic freedom" after coming under pressure from administrators not to publish the results of a survey on "Borrowed Pricey Wristwatches".

The fiasco is untimely. It comes just as Mr Prayuth has begun hinting that he plans to remain in politics after elections that are supposed to return Thailand to



Tell me when they've stopped watching

democracy. Even though existing parties are not allowed to do any campaigning or organising, several new, pro-junta parties are being allowed to form. The junta, which has been in power for four years, also recently delayed the promised election for the fourth time. It had been scheduled for November, but is now postponed until an undetermined point next year.

A poll actually permitted to enter the public domain, conducted by Suan Dusit Rajabhat University between January 24th and 27th, found that almost half of respondents opposed such a delay because of fears that it will harm both the economy and Thailand's image abroad. The otherwise beleaguered opposition seems keen to press its momentary advantage. Politicians are queuing up to demand Mr Prawit's resignation. But if he does step down, the generals must worry, it may embolden critics to call time on the entire junta.