

Bangkok, Jan 9 (AP) - Thailand's former Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra rejected any wrongdoing at the start of an impeachment hearing Friday that analysts say is aimed at ensuring the ousted leader stays out of politics for the foreseeable future. The charges, dismissed by Yingluck's supporters as politically motivated, relate to her alleged role in a disastrous government rice subsidy scheme. Military-appointed lawmakers are expected to vote on a verdict by the end of the month. If impeached, Yingluck could be banned from politics for five years. Yingluck was forced from office in early May by a court verdict that declared she had illegally transferred the nation's security chief. That verdict came after months of protests and one day before Thailand's anti-graft commission indicted her on charges of dereliction of duty in overseeing a widely criticized rice subsidy program, which accumulated losses of at least \$4 billion and temporarily cost Thailand its position as the world's leading rice exporter. On Friday, Yingluck defended the rice scheme and said it was "worthwhile" and was designed to support farmers. "I guarantee that I ran the country with honesty, fully under the given authority, with transparency and justice." Yingluck also questioned the legitimacy of the impeachment process and said it was "unnecessary" since she was no longer premier. She had insisted for months last year that the Southeast Asian nation's fragile democracy was being dismantled by protesters, the judiciary that removed her and finally the army, which staged a May 22 coup that wiped out the remnants of her administration. Yingluck's swift ascension was largely due to the popularity of her brother, Thaksin Shinawatra, who was ousted in a 2006 coup and lives in self-exile in Dubai. Analysts say Friday's hearing is more about the curbing the power of the Shinawatra family and keeping them out of politics. The junta has spoken of holding elections in 2015, but no date has been set. "The impeachment is geared to keep Yingluck at bay. If she's allowed to run in the next election, there's a good chance that she might win," said Thitinan Pongsudhirak, the director of the Institute of Security and International Studies at Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok. If Yingluck is prosecuted, however, the government "could risk incurring the wrath of the pro-Thaksin camp. At the same time, it would also deepen the polarization and divisions that we have seen in Thailand." The National Legislative Assembly, hand-picked by the junta and dominated by active and retired military officers, is deliberating on whether Yingluck neglected her duties by allowing the failed subsidy program to continue. The scheme, under which the government paid farmers double the market price, was a flagship policy that helped Yingluck's government win votes in the 2011 general election. On Thursday, the legislature began separate impeachment hearings against a former House speaker and a former Senate president for allegedly trying to amend the constitution, which the army suspended when it seized power.