Prasas Prasasvinitchai, Thailand's ambassador to Cambodia, is greeted by a throng of reporters after arriving at Phnom Penh International Airport last night.

THAKSIN Shinawatra’s tenure as economics adviser to the Cambodian government began with the fugitive former Thai premier swooping into Phnom Penh on his private jet last November to a warm reception from Kingdom officials that was broadcast live on local television. Its end came in decidedly less dramatic fashion, announced on Monday in a fax from the Cambodian government.

As the curtain fell on this round of political theatre, observers said the ensuing rapprochement between Cambodia and Thailand may prove a sideshow to their fundamental disagreement over their shared border.

The two countries are set to return their respective ambassadors after Thailand withdrew its envoy in protest against Thaksin’s appointment last year and Cambodia responded in kind. Thai Ministry of Foreign Affairs deputy spokesman Thani Thongphakdi said yesterday that this development “augurs well for the relations between both countries”, though Cambodian Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesman Koy Kuong insisted that the decision to cut ties with Thaksin was not a political one.

“He voluntarily resigned his post due to his business abroad,” Koy Kuong said. “This does not mean that the Cambodian government is trying to satisfy others.”

But Michael Montesano, a visiting fellow at Singapore’s Institute for Southeast Asian Studies, said Thaksin’s resignation “is something that the Bangkok and Phnom Penh governments will have been talking about and working on for some time”, and was unlikely to have been tendered voluntarily. The resumption of full diplomatic ties, he added, could allow the countries to discuss their long-simmering dispute over the border more directly.
“There is now scope for them to talk to each other rather than to shout at each other,” Montesano said.

Tension over the border erupted in 2008 after the listing of Preah Vihear temple as a UNESCO World Heritage site for Cambodia, as both sides laid claim to a 4.6-square-kilometre patch of land adjacent to the temple. The issue flared up again earlier this month after a meeting of UNESCO’s World Heritage Committee in which Cambodia submitted management plans for the temple.

Abhisit said Monday that Thaksin’s resignation would “clear the way for the two countries to more easily resolve all problems”, but Thailand’s domestic political landscape may make it difficult for Bangkok to give much ground on the border issue.

“There’s still a long way to go,” said Chris Roberts, a lecturer in international relations and Asian studies at the University of Canberra. He warned that Abhisit risked a nationalistic backlash from hardline members of Thailand’s Yellow Shirt movement if he reached “a practical and reasonable agreement with Cambodia” over the border.

The Cambodian government has expressed frustration over the slow pace of border negotiations, which have been stalled since last year because of repeated delays by the Thai parliament in ratifying the latest agreements of the countries’ Joint Border Commission. Earlier this month, Cambodian officials wrote to the United Nations and ASEAN to urge intervention in the matter, despite Thailand’s insistence that the border disagreement be resolved in a bilateral forum.

Ou Virak, president of the Cambodian Centre for Human Rights, said the move to cut ties with Thaksin, like the appeals to the UN and ASEAN, was part of an aggressive push by the Cambodian government to bring an end to the dispute.

“It gives Cambodia the upper hand when the Thaksin issue has been played out,” Ou Virak said. He called the provocative appointment of Thaksin a “mistake” and said the newly-severed ties would “separate the Preah Vihear conflict or tension from other kinds of issues”.

Montesano said Cambodia’s recent moves “had not pointed in the direction of a compromise” over the border, and the government has shown no sign that it will cease the steady flow of criticism it has directed at Bangkok over the past year - a statement released yesterday by the Press and Quick Reaction Unit at the Council of Ministers accused Abhisit of becoming “an accomplice and a sponsor of criminal-prone activity” by the Yellow Shirts.

“Once again, the [PQRU] urges Thai political figures to put an end to the malicious campaign of innuendo, suggestion and speculation to fault Cambodia by raising the issue of the Temple of Preah Vihear,” the statement read.