

## Controversial Thai minister resigns

Jakrapob Penkair, a minister attached to the prime minister's office, resigned Friday to face lese majeste (an offence committed against supreme power) charges for a speech he made about Thailand's political system of patronage last year.

'I did nothing wrong,' Jakrapob told a press conference as he announced his resignation. 'My priority now is to fight the case against me.'

Jakrapob claimed he was the victim of a 'political game' designed to undermine the current government, led by Prime Minister Samak Sundaravej of the People Power Party (PPP).

The PPP, which won the Dec 23 general election, is seen as a reincarnation of the Thai Rak Thai Party of former premier Thaksin Shinawatra, who was toppled by a coup in September 2006.

Jakrapob, a former government spokesman during Thaksin's first term as prime minister between 2001 to 2005, was an outspoken critic of the coup and defender of Thaksin during the 17 months Thailand was under a junta-appointed government.

The John Hopkins University graduate August 29, 2007, made an academic presentation at the Foreign Correspondents Club of Thailand on the system of patronage and democracy in Thailand that came back to haunt him after he became a minister.

Police Lieutenant-General Adisorn Nonsree, who heads the Central Investigation Bureau, announced Thursday that there were grounds to pursue a lese majeste case against Jakrapob, and summoned him to face charges.

Under Thailand's lese majeste law it is illegal to publicly insult or belittle the monarchy of royal family. Thailand has been a constitutional monarchy since 1932 when the absolute monarchy was overthrown by a military coup.

If found guilty, Jakrapob could face three to 15 years in prison.

Jakrapob has claimed that his accusers had deliberately mistranslated his speech, at which he linked the monarchy to the country's traditional system of patronage that has allegedly hindered the development of a true democracy.

In the same speech, Jakrapob painted Thaksin, a billionaire businessman who introduced populism to Thailand's traditional system of patronage and money politics, as a promoter of democratic reform, a questionable interpretation of Thaksin's political career which was best characterised by his CEO management style.

Jakrapob's downfall comes at tense time for Thailand's current government.

The PPP-led government has proposed an amendments to the 2007 constitution which if pushed through could lead to the dropping of several corruption charges against Thaksin and his eventual return to politics.

Thaksin, who remained in self-exile for 17 months after the coup and only returned when his supporters in the PPP were firmly in power, has been banned from politics along with 110 of his closest political allies by a Constitutional Tribunal ruling in May, 2007.

The People's Alliance for Democracy, a loose political grouping that spearheaded the anti-Thaksin protests that eventually led to the 2006 coup, relaunched its protests this month in an effort to derail constitutional amendments that might lead to Thaksin's return.

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