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Three Phuket mayors fight corruption charges

PHUKET: Three Phuket mayors – Rawai Mayor Aroon Solos, Pa Khlok Mayor Panya Samphaorat and Juta Dumlak, Chief of the Kamala Tambon Administrative Organisation (OrBorTor) – are all currently fighting corruption charges in court, Phuket Vice Governor Ronnarong Thipsiri has confirmed.

By [Natnaree Likidwatanasakun](#)

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From left: Kamala OrBorTor Chief Juta Dumlak, Pa Khlok Mayor Panya Samphaorat and Rawai Mayor Aroon Solos. Photos: Pa Khlok Municipality / Kamala OrBorTor / Rawai Municipality

The three cases were highlighted by Vice Governor Ronnarong to *The Phuket News*, as he explained that provincial officials were ramping up their efforts to curtail corruption on the island.

Pa Khlok Mayor Panya was charged by the Phuket branch of National Anti-Corruption Commission (NACC) for “neglecting duties” related to public land. The Criminal Court for Corruption and Misconduct accepted the case on March 30, 2022, V/Gov Ronnarong explained.

Kamala OrBorTor Chief Juta was charged by Phuket NACC for “corruption or misconduct in public office” in relation to the issuance of building permits. The Criminal Court for Corruption and Misconduct Cases accepted the case on Dec 19, 2023, he added.

Rawai Mayor Aroon Solos was reported by the Phuket NACC for corruption related to issuing building permits. The Criminal Court for Corruption and Misconduct accepted the case against Mayor Aroon on Sept 28, 2020.

However, no action was taken until the Supreme Administrative Court in September last year ruled that the office of the Rawai Mayor and a committee that performed the environment impact studies for the Eva Beach project in Rawai had “acted unlawfully and negligently in performing duties as required by law”.

Phuket NACC Chief Suwat Saowarat confirmed to *The Phuket News*, “Two of them, OrBorTor Chief Juta and Mayor Aroon, have been suspended from their duties.

“Only Mayor Panya decided to file a petition with the Administrative Court, which issued a Temporary Protection Order allowing him to continue performing his duties,” he said.

Although not fully forthcoming with details about the three cases, Phuket NACC Chief Suwat confirmed to *The Phuket News* that his office did bring the charges against the three mayors.

Mr Suwat also confirmed that all cases handled by his office are those involving corruption of more than half a million baht. Cases involving less than that are handled by the Public Sector Ant-Corruption Commission (PACC).

V/Gov Ronnarong confirmed this week that Juta and Aroon both are not receiving their standard government salary while the corruption cases are heard against them in court, in accordance with regulations under the Comptroller-General’s Department.

MISSING IN ACTION

While Panya is currently still performing his duties as Pa Khlok Mayor, Juta and Aroon have both been prohibited from their official duties for months.

With no irony, all three were not present when Phuket officials, led by Phuket Governor Sophon Suwannarat, marked International Anti-Corruption Day earlier this month, on Dec 9.

When questioned by *The Phuket News*, Kamala OrBorTor confirmed that Juta was temporarily suspended while facing charges of corruption, but declined to recognise any details of the case against him. The office also declined to confirm exactly when Juta was suspended.

Rawai Municipality’s response was worse. Acting on a tip-off that Aroon had been suspended while facing corruption charges, *The Phuket News* contacted Rawai Municipality on Aug 23, only to be told that Aroon was not in the office as he had injured his back in a fall while cycling.

The officer *The Phuket News* spoke with, who declined to be named, later said that Aroon had returned to work and was assisting villagers affected by the floods at that time. However, Rawai Municipality continued to fail to show Aroon performing official duties in their official reports and Facebook posts.

By September, Rawai Municipality maintained that Aroon was acting as mayor, but was away attending a seminar in Nonthaburi. Rawai Municipality then declined to provide any comment on its own mayor facing corruption charges, with no notices informing the public.

‘ALLEGED’ GRAFT

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Aroon faces charges for wrongly issuing construction permits for the Eva Beach project – twice, V/Gov Ronnarong explained.

The case against Pa Khlok Mayor Panya involved land that was originally designated as a public road.

“One day, the landowner changed, and the new owner was unaware that part of the area had been allocated for public use. After purchasing the land, the new owner expanded it and planted palm trees along the original public road. The mayor was accused of not revoking the changes or taking action against the new owner,” Mr Ronnarong explained

“Like Aroon, Kamala OrBorTor Chief Juta also faced charges related to wrongly issuing building permits, and the mayor remains suspended from duty,” he added.

CLEANING HOUSE

“I have been working on this issue for a long time, as I am a former Inspector-General of the Department of Provincial Administration (DOPA),” Mr Ronnarong said.

“When I took up the position of Vice Governor, I formed a committee comprising the Phuket Provincial Office, Phuket NACC and the PACC to address corruption seriously, learn from the cases and educate those who are unaware of the law,” he explained.

“For those who are aware, they should not repeat these actions. I do not want this cycle to continue, where issues arise, get covered up and lead to another investigation,” Mr Ronnarong said

Mr Ronnarong emphasised that corruption in Phuket falls into two categories: Those who are clearly and undeniably corrupt; and those who make “mistakes” due to a lack of understanding of the law.

“To clarify on the second type, some officials may not be aware of the situation and simply certify documents or approvals proposed by others,” he said.

“For example, newly appointed district chiefs in areas like Kathu, who have little experience with land law enforcement and a lack of understanding of the boundaries between public and private areas, may be unaware of signing the important documents,” he added.

“Imagine being appointed as a district chief by the Ministry of Interior, especially when you’re not local and not familiar with every inch of the land. When someone applies for a title deed, the district chief is tasked with advising caution regarding the boundaries. However, I have observed that some of them have no clear understanding of the original boundaries of public land.”

Mr Ronnarong pointed out that many officials in Phuket are not locals, and often have no idea of where official boundaries of public land lay.

“For instance, the permit on the area of forest boundaries, these are managed by the Phuket Royal Forest Department (RFD), but if Phuket RFD officers do not attend meetings, district chiefs remain unaware of these boundaries.

“Without clear information, they may sign off on decisions without truly understanding the area in question, especially when the area’s ownership isn’t clearly defined,” he said.

“Currently, there is a committee being formed in the province to prevent corruption. The goal is to train and educate officials who may not fully understand legal processes or how to handle cases that have been brought to court.

“Through this training, we aim to prevent corruption and to teach officials how to avoid signing documents they don’t fully understand. This will help combat corruption by showing that officials are being monitored, thus preventing issues from escalating beyond repair,” he concluded.

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