

# Tense standoff in the Philippines after Estrada impeachment trial comes to a halt

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The impeachment trial of Philippine President Joseph Estrada came to an abrupt halt on Tuesday night after the Senate, which is hearing the charges, voted 11-10 to block the opening of key bank records. According to the prosecutors, the documents would have proven that Estrada had amassed \$US66 million in bribes and kickbacks under four aliases during his 18 months in office.

The brazen move by Estrada loyalists in the Senate to prevent potentially incriminating evidence from coming to light provoked immediate protests. Senate President Pimentel Aquilino and Senate Secretary Lutgardo Barbo angrily resigned, followed by the entire team of 11 prosecutors, who are members of the House of Representatives.

In their formal statement, the prosecutors said: "It is clear to us that the judgment of the impeachment court will not be reached on the basis of truth that the people seek, but on the partisan votes of a majority of senator-judges. We do not wish to legitimise the proceedings of a tribunal that has lost the moral authority to render judgment on an impeachable official who has clearly lost the ascendancy to govern."

House Representative Sergio Apostol commented: "To us, prosecuting is already a sham. The impeachment court is already tainted with bias." Prosecutor Joker Arroyo denounced the vote as "a shameless vote of acquittal. This means there are 11 senators there who are in the pocket of the president."

Estrada was impeached by the House of Representatives last year following revelations by a former political ally, Ilocos Sur governor Luis Singson, that the president had taken more than \$7.7 million in bribes from the operators of an illegal gambling racket known as "jueteng" and another \$2.5 million from provincial tobacco taxes. In the course of the last three

weeks, substantial evidence has been presented to the Senate corroborating Singson's allegations.

While Estrada's support in both houses of parliament has substantially eroded, the latest decision reveals that a majority of senators are still prepared to stick by him. A two-thirds Senate majority is required for him to be found guilty and removed from office.

Davide has adjourned the trial indefinitely. Estrada's lawyers have called on the chief justice to set a deadline for the House of Representatives to select a new set of prosecutors, warning that they will move for the dismissal of all charges otherwise.

The trial's breakdown has led to a tense standoff. As news of the Senate decision became known on Tuesday, protestors took to the streets of Manila as well as the regional cities of Davao and Cebu. Led by Archbishop Jaime Sin, former president Corazon Aquino and Vice President Gloria Arroyo, more than 10,000 people gathered for a midnight vigil. Archbishop Sin told the crowd: "I am so afraid that... we might not be able to stop bloodshed. We know in our hearts that the president is guilty."

On Wednesday and Thursday, the demonstrations in Manila grew to 40,000. Aquino pledged to lead demonstrations every day until Estrada is forced from power. Fidel Ramos, her successor as president, warned that Estrada would face a "Peoples Power" revolt similar to the one led by Aquino in 1986 that toppled the late dictator Ferdinand Marcos.

Aquino and Sin, together with business leaders, have been calling on Estrada to step down since the scandal erupted in October. Arroyo, who is next in line should Estrada be removed from office, has become the figurehead for a disparate opposition movement that includes businessmen, trade union officials and priests, as well as students and workers.

Estrada, however, has repeatedly refused to step down. He still claims to have support among the country's poor and has dismissed the charges against him as a big business conspiracy.

A number of newspapers, both in the Philippines and internationally, have pointed to the dangers of the present political impasse. An editorial in Rupert Murdoch's *Australian* on Friday warned that the Senate decision had "increased the likelihood that his fate will now be decided on the streets rather than constitutionally. That's stupid.... The worst thing is that no one is sure what is going to happen next (and that includes the possibility of a military coup)."

Estrada held a late-night emergency meeting on Tuesday with his lawyers, Executive Secretary Edgardo Angara, Armed Forces Chief of Staff General Angelo Reyes and National Police chief Panfilo Lacson. The country's security forces have been put on the highest state of alert. Extra riot police were brought into Manila from outlying areas for Wednesday's protests. Security has been tightened at the armed forces headquarters, where a tank has been stationed in the street, and the national police headquarters.

Commenting on the Senate decision, the president's acting press secretary Mike Toledo said: "We hope that they [the prosecution] will not use this event as an excuse or reason to label this process as tainted because we have to remember we are setting a lot of precedents in this first impeachment trial in our country." Estrada took a harsher line, bluntly warning the opposition: "If they incite revolution, they will be put in their proper places."

There are indications that opposition leaders are engaged in behind-the-scenes talks to find a formula to end the political crisis and restart the impeachment process. A large opposition march to the presidential palace scheduled for Friday was called off to avoid any conflict with Estrada's supporters. House Representative Joker Arroyo hinted on Thursday that the trial could resume if Estrada were prepared to take the stand—a suggestion that has at present been rejected by the president's lawyers

Estrada is under considerable pressure from the money markets. On Wednesday, the peso fell to a record low against the US dollar of 55.75 and the Manila stock market plunged by 8 percent before recovering slightly for a loss of 6 percent over the day.

Share values fell by another 1.3 percent on Thursday.

Philippine Stock Exchange governor Vivian Yuchengco commented that the credibility of the Philippines was in tatters. Nine business groups issued a statement saying: "The market has condemned this injustice. The repercussions of last night's decision will be felt most deeply by the poor and the jobless, as prices rise, investments fall, and jobs disappear."

Neither Estrada nor the major corporations have any concern about the poor. During the 1998 elections, big business tolerated Estrada's populist appeals, calculating that he could be used to push through the austerity measures demanded by the International Monetary Fund. Estrada let it be known in the course of the campaign that he was prepared to do precisely that.

Business chiefs have been increasingly disappointed with the Estrada administration however. Criticisms have been made, at home and abroad, of the government's failure to accelerate economic restructuring or to rein in the high level of government spending. A combination of high oil prices and declining exports has led to lower growth rates and rising prices. The Estrada scandal has only led to further political instability and economic uncertainty.

For major sections of the ruling class, Estrada has become a liability who has to go—the quicker Gloria Arroyo, a Harvard-trained economist, replaces him the better. Whatever the immediate outcome of this week's Senate decision, the stage has been set for deepening political turmoil.



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