

Renewed efforts to impeach Philippines president

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Late last month, the first of several petitions to restart impeachment procedures against Philippines president Gloria Macapagal Arroyo was filed in the lower house of the national parliament. While the latest impeachment moves appear to have little chance of success, the issue is being fuelled by an acrimonious debate in ruling circles over a package of constitutional changes being vigorously pushed by Arroyo.

The first complaint was filed on June 26 and was followed the next day by a second petition from former vice-president Teofisto Guingona. The complaints repeat allegations made in impeachment proceedings last year, including that Arroyo rigged the May 2004 presidential election, her close family members have been involved in accepting kickbacks and her administration has attacked democratic rights.

The moves to oust Arroyo stalled last year after she proposed changes to the constitution that would transform the country's political system from a presidential to a parliamentary one. Having failed, a second impeachment attempt had to wait a year, in line with current legal requirements.

Responding to the petitions, presidential advisor Gabriel Claudio issued a statement on July 8 declaring the latest impeachment moves had no chance of obtaining the 79 signatures needed in the House of Representatives to refer the charges for trial in the upper house Senate. The lower house is currently dominated by Arroyo's supporters, including her own Lakas party. Claudio said that Arroyo's opponents were by their own admission incoherent and disunited.

Arroyo is pressing ahead with her plans for constitution change, also widely known in the Philippines as "Cha Cha", short for Charter Change. Under the proposal, the present two parliamentary bodies would be reduced to one, which would elect a prime minister, reducing the current executive president to a largely formal head of

state. Arroyo has also made a series of proposals to remove constitutional restrictions on the operation of foreign capital in the Philippines.

The steps have the backing of big business and foreign investors. In mid-June, investment fund management firm Merrill Lynch issued an "overweight" buy recommendation for the Philippines on the basis that impeachment had little chance of success and the prospects for constitutional change were at least 50 percent. UK based Merrill Lynch analyst Benoit Anne said that a unicameral legislature would "streamline" decision-making and be "cost effective".

Arroyo appointed a 55-member Consultative Commission in August last year to propose changes to the 1987 constitution. The commission recommended in December that the 2007 elections for the House of Representatives and half the Senate be cancelled. The elected politicians would serve as an interim government with Arroyo as head of state, sharing power with a prime minister, until fresh elections in May 2010 under the new constitutional arrangements.

The process was due to start last month, but has run into fierce opposition. Many critics had denounced the proposals as a backdoor means of extending Arroyo's term of office. As a result, the administration has been forced to ditch plans to cancel the 2007 elections. The constitutional changes have also been vehemently opposed in the parliamentary Senate, which would be abolished.

As 21 of the 26 senators have rejected the changes, Arroyo has been unable to amend the constitution via parliament and has been forced to resort to a popular plebiscite known as a "people's initiative". This week Sigaw ng Bayan, an umbrella group of Arroyo's supporters, and the Union of Local Authorities of the Philippines (ULAP) are due to present a petition with 10.8 million signatures calling for the institution of a people's

initiative to amend the constitution.

The organisations claim to have the signatures of more than the 12 percent of the national electorate and three percent of voters in each congressional district needed to force a plebiscite. Arroyo has ignored objections by her opponents that a 1997 Supreme Court ruling made the whole process illegal because of the lack of enabling legislation. Dispensing with legal precedent, government supporters have simply pointed out that the judges involved in the split vote have since left the court.

While the only question posed on the petition is the establishment of a parliamentary system, its advocates are also pushing to remove constitutional and legal restrictions on the ownership of land and other barriers to foreign investment in mining, media and communications. On July 5, ULAP issued a statement declaring that the political changes would clear the way for the Philippines to join the ranks of Asia's tiger economies. "This is what Charter Change is about," ULAP board member Allan Zulueta told a rally in Batanes province.

Romela Bengzon, chairman of the Charter Change Advocacy Commission's economic liberalisation committee, said that "restrictive and protectionist economic policies" had to be ditched to attract foreign investment to provide jobs and renovate infrastructure. Bengzon used figures for 2003 to illustrate the country's poor performance in attracting foreign direct capital: that year Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia received \$US24.1 billion, \$10.4 billion, \$7.3 billion and \$4.3 billion respectively. The Philippines received just \$3.1 billion.

Opponents of Charter Change include powerful political forces opposed to any further opening of the economy to foreign competition. One of the opposition groups called STOP (Sa Tamang Oras at Paraan) is headed by former president Corazon Aquino, senators and congressmen, business groups and Catholic bishops. The bishops have denounced the "peoples' initiative" campaign, saying most people signing the petition were ill-informed and were being manipulated.

Opposition centres around the economic changes. Aquino became president following the popular revolt that ousted the Marcos military dictatorship in 1986 and enshrined the current protectionist measures in the 1987 constitution. In essence, she speaks for landowners and business layers in the Philippines who fear that greater foreign competition will undermine their economic and political position.

Like Arroyo, her opponents attempt to camouflage their

class interest by claiming to speak in the name of the poor as well as defending the national "patrimony". Aquino is being backed by various leftist and Stalinist parties. The Philippine Communist Party (PKP) issued a statement last month denouncing the constitutional amendments as a plot to remove "all of the remaining patriotic provisions" from the constitution.

Debate over ending the protectionist measures in the constitution has been a key feature of the country's repeated political crises.

In 1999, the administration of President Joseph Estrada also proposed Cha Cha reforms. As his secretary for socioeconomic planning Felipe Medalla explained: "The president sees the need to make the Constitution foreign investment-friendly to give the Philippines a competitive edge in the world market."

In 2000 Estrada opened the retail trade and grain milling to foreign investment. These steps, however, earned him powerful enemies, including Aquino, who led a protest campaign that blocked his proposed constitutional changes. In January 2001, he was ousted from office over trumped-up corruption charges by an opposition movement in which Aquino, church leaders and the military were prominent.

Arroyo, who replaced Estrada, has followed an economic agenda, which is opposed by many of those who supported her in 2001. Her administration has partly deregulated the energy sector and won the plaudits of international finance by increasing the Value Added Tax from 10 to 12 percent in February.

There is no doubt, however, that Arroyo's proposed constitutional changes are again opening up sharp divisions in ruling circles and thus the prospect of deepening political turmoil.



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