

Ex-Philippine President Arroyo arrested for electoral fraud

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Former Philippine President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo was placed under arrest in her hospital room last Friday on charges of electoral fraud. The political conflict between the executive and judicial branches of the Philippine government over President Benigno Aquino III's denial of Arroyo's attempts to depart the country has reached the level of a constitutional crisis.

Former President Arroyo is among the most hated political figures in Philippine history. Her nine years in office were characterized by the markedly heightened exploitation of the poor and the working class, the brutal repression of dissent, thuggery and fraud. It is not this record, however, that drives the Aquino administration's prosecution of Arroyo.

Rival sections of the bourgeoisie are settling scores. This has been the case with every major corruption scandal in Philippine history, from accusations against President Manuel Quezon in the Commonwealth period under American colonial rule to the ouster of Joseph Estrada in 2001. What is pronounced in Aquino's prosecution of Arroyo, however, is that it occurs in the context of rapidly mounting geopolitical tensions between the United States and China, and is driven by the interests of US imperialism.

The initial salvo fired by the Aquino administration against the bulwarks of Arroyo's political clout was a corruption scandal within the Philippine military earlier this year. The impetus for the investigation into that scandal, as well as the vital pieces of evidence in its prosecution, came from the US State Department.

When Aquino announced in his State of the Nation Address that he would be filing charges against Arroyo for corruption, plunder and electoral fraud, his speech was hailed by US Pacific Commander Admiral Robert Willard in a personal meeting with Aquino on the same day. Last week, Aquino railroaded through charges of

electoral fraud against Arroyo, hastily attempting to prevent her from leaving the country. US President Barack Obama responded in a speech at the ASEAN summit in Bali on Friday, pointedly expressing "appreciation for Aquino's anti-corruption efforts."

President Arroyo came to power in 2001 with firm US support for her and for the military-backed constitutional coup which removed her predecessor, Joseph Estrada. Over the space of her nine years in office—the first decade of the twenty-first century—a tectonic shift occurred in global economic alliances. The decline of the United States and sharp rise of China brought about a reorientation of the interests and ties of the Arroyo administration toward Beijing.

In 2004, Arroyo withdrew the Philippine troops from the US-led occupation of Iraq. Under her leadership a number of important infrastructural projects were awarded to Chinese corporations, despite lower bids from American companies. In 2005 Arroyo signed a tripartite deal with China and Vietnam, called the Joint Marine Seismic Undertaking (JMSU). The JMSU authorized the joint exploration and drilling of 142,000 square kilometers of previously disputed seabed in the South China Sea.

In the aftermath of the 2008 economic crisis and with the rise to the presidency of Obama, Washington shifted its focus back to the Asia Pacific region. The JMSU was abandoned by Arroyo in 2010, and tensions between China, Vietnam and the Philippines have already produced minor clashes in the South China Sea. After coming to power in 2010, Aquino turned sharply to Washington and with US backing more aggressively asserted Philippine territorial claims in the Sea against those of China.

Aquino announced in late September that Arroyo

would be arrested by the end of the year. In the first week of October, the head of Commission on Elections announced that Arroyo and her husband would be in jail by Christmas. News that Arroyo had a bone disease quickly began circulating and it was reported that she would need to seek treatment abroad.

Events came fast and thick over the past week. The Justice Department denied Arroyo's petition to leave the country, despite the fact that no charges had yet been formally filed against her. Under Philippine law, all citizens have the explicit right to leave the country except when it would jeopardize national security. Responding to Arroyo's petition, the Justice Department attempted to exploit the catch-all 'national interest' clause.

Arroyo filed an appeal with the Supreme Court, which issued a temporary restraining order (TRO) on the departure block, thus authorizing Arroyo to leave the country. The vote was split on strictly partisan lines. Arroyo-appointed justices voted in her favor, those appointed by Aquino and those who had since become Arroyo's opponents voted against. The majority of the court remains firmly in Arroyo's camp.

Leila de Lima, head of the Justice Department, stated that she was overriding the TRO and would block Arroyo's departure, deliberately ignoring the instructions of the Supreme Court. On Tuesday, an emaciated wheelchair-bound Arroyo, her head supported by a massive neck and shoulder brace, was turned away from the departure terminal at Ninoy Aquino International Airport.

On the same day US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton arrived in Manila. She praised Aquino's government, offered additional US economic aid and promised a second warship as part of the reorientation of US military aid in the Philippines toward preparation for maritime conflict.

The confrontation over the separation of powers between the judiciary and the executive deepened. The Supreme Court found the Justice Department's overriding of the TRO unconstitutional. Aquino delayed his departure from the Philippines to the ASEAN summit by one day in order to personally expedite the issuance of an arrest warrant for Arroyo.

On Friday, the warrant was issued and Arroyo was detained in her hospital room at St. Luke's Medical Center in Taguig, Metro Manila. The charges filed were

for electoral fraud in the 2007 senatorial election. It is clear that the charges were hastily thrown together, and the warrant was issued by a regional trial judge without a complete review of the evidence. Two members of the Commission on Elections did not sign off on the charges, and it has now been revealed that the court in which the charges were filed did not actually have jurisdiction in this case.

The Supreme Court is today threatening to reverse the warrant. The constitutional crisis has the potential for sharp ramifications. The head spokesperson for the Department of National Defense held a press conference on Friday and issued the usual shibboleths of Philippine politics, declaring that the military was united in its support of Aquino and rumors of coup plotting were baseless. In an extraordinary statement backing extra-constitutional measures, he added that the military would support Aquino should he declare a 'revolutionary government' to deal with the current conflict with the Supreme Court and to restore 'order' to the country.

By tacitly backing Aquino in his prosecution of Arroyo, Washington is serving notice to leaders within the region of the potential implications of shifting their allegiances away from the United States or of forming too close ties with China.



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