

Impeachment trial of chief justice opens in the Philippines

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The impeachment trial of Supreme Court Chief Justice Renato Corona opens today in the Philippines. This is the second impeachment trial in the country's history and is part of a campaign by President Benigno Aquino to consolidate power over his political rivals, led by former President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo. With each new step in this campaign, Aquino has employed increasingly anti-democratic measures. Aquino's campaign has been conspicuously backed by Washington as part of its drive against China.

When Aquino assumed office in 2010, former President Arroyo was a serious political threat to his newly established administration. She led a sizeable bloc in the legislature; had appointed the entire Supreme Court, having stacked it with judges beholden to her interests; the military top brass were perceived to be loyal to her; and the Office of the Ombudsman, responsible for the filing of charges against government officials, was under her sway.

Over the space of a year, the Aquino administration broke her base of power. It initiated impeachment charges against the ombudsman, who resigned. A massive corruption scandal broke out against the entire top military leadership, resulting in arrests, resignations, and the suicide of the former head of the Armed Forces.

Arroyo's political party in the legislature has split several times, most recently last week. When Aquino assumed office, Arroyo had 61 official party members in the House of Representatives and close alliances with more than half of the legislature. Over the past weekend a minority caucus was called in support of Arroyo; it drew eight members.

Arroyo herself has been arrested, and charged with

electoral fraud and with corruption in a case involving rigged bidding on behalf of a Chinese state corporation.

Arroyo's last bastion of political support is the Supreme Court. Renato Corona, the chief justice currently being tried on articles of impeachment, was Arroyo's chief of staff prior to being appointed to the court. She installed him as Chief Justice two days after Aquino was elected president. The Supreme Court ruled unanimously that this did not constitute a midnight appointment.

The Supreme Court has consistently struck down initiatives by the Aquino administration against Arroyo as unconstitutional. When Aquino moved to have Arroyo arrested, the Supreme Court reversed a former ruling regarding Hacienda Luisita, the massive sugar plantation of the president's own Cojuangco-Aquino family, ordering the redistribution of the land. Aquino responded by having Corona impeached.

The last decade—the decade of Arroyo's rule—has seen the explosive growth of the Chinese economy. Arroyo began to reorient Philippine economic and political ties away from the United States and towards China. Washington has backed Aquino's prosecution of Arroyo, and has courted, and won, the support of his administration as a proxy for US interests against China in the region.

The charges against Corona were drafted by Aquino and railroaded through the House of Representatives in less than three hours. The 188 signatories supporting Aquino admitted freely that they did not even read the articles of impeachment.

Corona stands charged on eight articles. The main focus of the 11-member panel of prosecutors from the House of

Representatives seems to be that Corona has failed to file the mandated Statement of Assets, Liabilities and Net Worth (SALN), that lurking behind this failure is corruption and the theft of government funds, and that he has been beholden to Arroyo in his decisions.

The strategy of the Aquino administration is to besmirch Corona and to publicly disgrace him until he resigns. As votes now line up in the Senate, it is questionable if the prosecutors can get a guilty verdict on any of the eight articles. Senator Osmena, who supports Aquino against Arroyo, stated clearly in the press that Corona would be humiliated, that a political trial would bring out all sorts of sordid allegations, concluding, “I expect CJ Corona to resign, I can bet on it.”

Article 18, of the Senate “Rules of Procedure on Impeachment Trials” dictates that that evidence must be presented during the trial, not prior to it. The house prosecuting panel, in flagrant violation of this article, repeatedly released evidence over the past weeks, alleging that Corona owned 45 properties, and implying that these were acquired through the malfeasance of public funds. At base, they stated, the problem was that Corona had not filed an SALN. Most of the ‘properties’ were parking spaces, or lots owned by family members, or had been sold in the 1980s.

A damning report was released last week by the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism revealed that no one—not a single legislator and no member the Aquino cabinet—had filed the mandated annual Statement of Assets, Liabilities and Net Worth. If Corona should be impeached for this failure, then so should entire judiciary, legislature and executive branches of government.

On Friday, President Aquino announced in a TV interview that he would move to impeach the other Supreme Court justices if they continued to rule against his government. If Corona is impeached, Aquino has openly stated that he has a ‘plan B,’ entitled “Occupy the Supreme Court.” He stated that he has picked Corona’s successor—even if Corona is acquitted. While this threat is hanging over the heads of the remaining justices, the Cojuangco family has filed a petition for the reconsideration of the redistribution of its hacienda.

The various groups of the Philippine ‘left’—party list organizations Bayan Muna and Akbayan, in

particular—have played a truly disgusting role in all of this, giving Aquino’s power grab their full backing. They signed the articles of impeachment sight unseen and are an integral part of the 11 member prosecution team. All the charges against both Arroyo and Corona were filed by them. They have been organizing rallies demanding the resignation of Corona. If Aquino calls for his anti-democratic ‘plan B,’ it is certain that the ‘left’ will be at its forefront.

On Friday, Washington gave a conspicuous display of its support for Aquino in the upcoming trial. US Ambassador to the Philippines Harry Thomas met with the Aquino’s ombudsman to give a check for \$100,000. The money had been seized from the two sons of a Philippine general accused of corruption while they were entering the United States. The money was seized in 2003, on charges of currency smuggling, and not because of corruption allegations in the Philippines. Nearly nine years later, on the eve of a massive impeachment trial, the US embassy held a photo op and gave the money to the Aquino administration. The ambassador stated that the check was “a symbol of the US support for the anti-corruption effort that you are leading ... We will continue to work with the Ombudsman in this anticorruption effort.”

On January 17, schedule to be the second day of the impeachment hearings, the Supreme Court will convene en banc to rule on an appeal calling for the throwing out of the impeachment charges on the grounds that the legislators never read the articles of impeachment and affixed their signatures to a document that stated “I have read and endorse the above.” The potential for an escalation of the constitutional crisis is very real.



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