

Further US involvement in Philippine constitutional crisis

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Former Philippine President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo was arraigned yesterday on charges of electoral fraud and entered a plea of not guilty. The impeachment trial of Supreme Court chief Justice Renato Corona continues in the Philippine Senate. Both of these events are part of the ongoing drive by current President Aquino to consolidate power from his political rivals under the guise of a ‘war on corruption’. Aquino has, at every turn, employed increasingly anti-democratic tactics to achieve his ends. The vital role played in this process by the United States is becoming ever more transparent, with Aquino appointing an American ‘anti-corruption’ consultant as official advisor to his cabinet.

On February 11, the Philippine Supreme Court imposed a temporary restraining order on the subpoena of Corona’s bank records issued by the Senate impeachment court. The bank accounts in question were dollar accounts and by Philippine bank secrecy laws could not be opened without the express consent of the depositor. A complete constitutional break-down was avoided when the Senate voted 13-10 on February 14 to honor the Supreme Court’s injunction and cancel the subpoena.

The subpoena had been issued on the basis of documents that were purportedly copies of Corona’s bank records obtained by the congressional representatives on the prosecution panel. It has since emerged, based on testimony from the President of PSBank, that the documents have been doctored and apparently obtained by illegal means.

The squabbling over the provenance of Corona’s bank records has serious ramifications. Testimony over the past few days revealed convincingly that the documents were obtained during an audit of the bank conducted by the Anti-Money Laundering Council (AMLC), a division of the government accountable directly to the executive. Beginning in late 2010, the AMLC began an audit of bank accounts belonging to prominent political figures. Each such account

was marked “Politically Exposed Person (PEP)”. The testimony of bank officials points to a massive campaign carried out by the AMLC in violation of bank secrecy laws to gather information for the potential blackmail or exposure of political rivals on charges of corruption.

President Aquino has been placing constant public pressure on the Senate to rule against Corona. His press secretary issued statements vouching for the authenticity of Corona’s bank records. This was unintentionally a fairly damning indication that the executive had control over the release of the documents, for how else could they attest to their veracity? Since the Senate submitted to the Supreme Court restraining order, Aquino’s public speeches have taken a more stridently demagogic tone. “Are we going to let only a few to decide for all of us?” he asked.

Today marks the 26th anniversary of the ouster of President Marcos and the installation of Aquino’s mother, Corazon Aquino, as president. Aquino, along with a number of columnists in prominent newspapers, and all of the various sections of the ex-left, has begun calling for the public to override the Senate and throw out Corona through extra-constitutional means.

Akbayan, the ‘left’ party in Aquino’s own cabinet, has issued a call to “Relive EDSA [a reference to the “people power” movement involved in ousting Marcos], Remove Corona.” They are leading a rally today at the Supreme Court. Akbayan representative Walden Bello has further escalated matters by issuing a house bill for the government to confiscate Corona’s assets, while his trial is still ongoing.

Any move to oust Corona prior to a Senate verdict would involve the use of military force to shut down the Supreme Court and rearrange it according to the wishes of the executive. To do so, Aquino needs the cover of “people power” mobilization. The historical precedent of the ouster of President Estrada in 2001 demonstrates that a

constitutional coup could be carried out if the 'left' mobilized enough people in the streets. This is precisely what they are attempting to do.

Their efforts, however, are hampered by widespread public distaste for the entire impeachment proceedings. The sentiment on the street is of anger not at Corona, but at the entire farcical, bungling and anti-democratic impeachment debacle.

Carol Araullo, head of Bayan, the umbrella political organization linked to the Maoist Communist Party of the Philippines, called on the 'left' to use "its available resources and ability to forge broad alliances to influence public opinion." Both Akbayan and Bayan have created "broad alliances", i.e. have joined with all sections of the Philippine bourgeoisie opposed to Arroyo and her allies, particularly Corona, and are trying to generate a semblance of popular support for Aquino's power drive.

The assault on the judiciary has expanded. Impeachment charges have been brought before the House plenary session against a second Supreme Court justice, this time on the grounds of plagiarism. The charges are being held off for now. If the Court does not begin backing Aquino, most notably by supporting his case against Arroyo and reversing its decision ordering the redistribution of the Aquino family's vast sugar plantation, the second impeachment will proceed.

As the *World Socialist Website* has stressed throughout its coverage of Aquino's power consolidation, what lies at the base of all of Aquino's various anti-democratic manoeuvres is the provocative on-going escalation of the US confrontation with the China. While president, Arroyo began to shift Philippine economic ties and political policy away from the United States and more toward China. Washington has backed Aquino from the outset as a means of consolidating Philippine ties with the United States and to punish Arroyo and her allies.

On Wednesday, Aquino announced that he was appointing an American 'anti-corruption' expert, Robert Klitgaard, as a consultant to his cabinet. Klitgaard has been an analyst with the Pentagon-backed think tank, RAND Corporation. He was dean of RAND Graduate School and served as consultant and expert on corruption for RAND and the World Bank around the World. He has intervened in Philippine politics in the past.

In November 1972, two months after Marcos declared

Martial Law, Klitgaard published a RAND study on Marcos' seizure of power commissioned by the US military. He depicted the use of Martial Law as having a threefold purpose: to crackdown on dissidents, to fight corruption, and to support US business interests. There was "no evidence of brutality" and the police and the military "were trying hard to be models of civil behavior." Yet, he was compelled to admit, "people were locked up without trial and for as long as the President wished."

He pointed out that Marcos had removed all blocks to the entry of foreign capital, eliminated the capital gains tax, and won "effusive praise" from the US Chamber of Commerce. For "popular support" for Martial Law to continue, Marcos needed to produce "spectacular positive results".

Two weeks after Philippine President Joseph Estrada was ousted by constitutional coup, Klitgaard was in the Philippines at the behest of the influential US oriented business group, the Makati Business Club. He called for Estrada's arrest, saying that Arroyo would not retain public support "unless a big fish is publicly grilled."

Washington had a hand in both the declaration of Martial Law and the ouster of Estrada. Klitgaard served as US point man in both cases, an apologist for Martial Law and for the installation of Arroyo. That Aquino has brought Klitgaard on board his administration in the midst of a constitutional crisis, when rumblings of anti-democratic moves against the Supreme Court dominate the press, is a further escalation in the machinations of US imperialism in the region.



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