

Prosecution abruptly rests case in Philippine impeachment trial

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On February 28, the House panel of prosecutors in the impeachment trial of Philippine Chief Justice Renato Corona abruptly announced that they were resting their case. They dropped five of the eight articles of impeachment entirely and only presented a smattering of evidence for two others. The move by the prosecution reflects the rising tide of popular discontent with the trial.

The impeachment of Renato Corona has from its inception been the work of President Aquino. Aquino and his advisors drafted the articles of impeachment, railroaded them through Congress in three hours, and have carried on a relentless campaign of anti-democratic machinations and populist bombast against Corona. The wellspring of Aquino's determination to remove Corona is two-fold: Corona, at the helm of the Supreme Court, jeopardizes Aquino's bid to consolidate political power from his rival, former President Arroyo, and has moved to redistribute the vast sugar holdings of Aquino's family.

Washington has given its full support to Aquino's prosecution of Arroyo as part of its aggressive drive against China. The US has supplied Aquino with both information and technology for his 'anti-corruption campaign,' i.e., the prosecution of Arroyo and her allies. US diplomats and visiting Senators have given their explicit endorsement of Aquino's fight against 'the crimes of the past.' A fellow of the Pentagon-backed RAND Corporation think tank was recently made anti-corruption consultant to Aquino. From 2004 to 2010, Arroyo began to shift Philippine economic ties and political policy away from the United States and more toward China. Washington's support for Aquino's anti-Arroyo manoeuvres is a means of

consolidating Philippine ties with the United States and of punishing Arroyo and her allies.

The prosecution in the Corona case has been hamstrung from the outset by the hastily drafted articles of impeachment. There are clear indications that it was never the intention of Aquino and his supporters for the case to get to trial. The prosecution engaged in a campaign of publishing 'evidence' against Corona in the weeks leading up to the trial with the openly expressed aim of forcing him to resign. Allegations of vast ill-gotten wealth dominated the headlines of the mainstream press along with sordid rumors of extra-marital affairs in the tabloids.

Corona refused to resign. When the trial began the prosecution's case was entirely based on the second article of impeachment which charged Corona with possessing assets out of keeping with his mandated Statement of Assets, Liabilities and Net Worth (SALN).

At every step in the prosecution of the trial, the most provocative role has been played by the parties of the Philippine 'left.' Akbayan, a political party which emerged from splits with the Maoist Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) in the early 1990s and has since openly allied with Aquino's Liberal Party, forming a key part of his administration, and Bayan Muna, a CPP ally, have engaged in a game political one-up-manship. Each has striven to out-do the other in its drive against Corona.

The conduct of the impeachment trial has been a sordid and disgusting affair. Not one of the 188 members of congress who voted to impeach Corona

had read the articles drafted against him by Aquino. Not one of the politicians responsible for his prosecution or for the adjudication of the case had filed their mandated SALNs, despite alleged discrepancies in Corona's SALN being the heart of the case against him.

The prosecution has produced fraudulent bank documents to support their case. Evidence strongly suggests that Aquino ordered a vast illegal investigation of the financial records of elected officials which could be used to tarnish, blackmail or pressure opponents into toeing the political line of his administration. Some of these records were used against Corona. Prominent critics of the impeachment trial have had trumped up charges of corruption filed against them.

Several surveys conducted at the outset of the trial revealed widespread distrust for Corona and support for his impeachment. Over the first few weeks of the trial what emerged most clearly was that the prosecution had no case; they were fishing for evidence—opening bank accounts, subpoenaing tax records, looking for some wrong-doing that they could make stick. They found about \$US1 million in excess of that which Corona declared on his SALN salted away in various bank accounts. Corona's defense claims that they will account for this during their presentation of evidence as either inheritance or the income of Corona's wife.

As the anti-democratic methods of Aquino and the prosecution became more brazen, popular discontent over the trial mounted. The entire impeachment circus was becoming repugnant—the somewhat unhinged Senator Miriam Santiago screaming at and cursing prosecutors, prosecutors openly lying about the sources of their fraudulent documents, and a day spent deliberating about Corona's alleged ownership of a parking space.

As the anti-democratic ploys within the court were failing, Aquino and his 'left' lackeys began to speak more openly of the need for 'people power' to oust Corona. This was, in a much repeated phrase, the sword to cut the "Gordian knot of impeachment." The prosecution began to leak rumors last week that it would shortly rest its case. Sufficient evidence had

been adduced to convict, they said.

On the day the prosecution announced it was resting its case, a massive rally was held by the politically powerful local church, Iglesia ni Cristo, with an estimated 500,000 to 600,000 in attendance. While ostensibly a hastily called prayer rally, it is openly understood that this was a political protest of the treatment of Corona, whose lead attorney is the head legal counsel for the church.

The prosecution dropped five of the eight articles of impeachment, produced only one witness for article 3, and a handful for article 7. The court has adjourned until March 12, when it will resume with the presentation of the defense.



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