

Former Philippine president arrested on the charge of plunder

Joseph Santolan
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On October 4, former Philippine president Gloria Macapagal Arroyo was arrested on the charge of plunder. The charge against her is being used by President Aquino's administration to hold Arroyo without bail.

This is the second time that Arroyo has been arrested in the past year. In November 2011, Arroyo was arrested on the charge of election fraud for the alleged rigging of the 2007 midterm election on behalf of candidates in her party. The official charge of "electoral sabotage" is a bailable offense, and after lengthy deliberation by the court, Arroyo was released on bail on July 26, 2012.

In the week leading up to Arroyo's release it became apparent that her request for bail would be granted. The Aquino administration hastily filed for a warrant of arrest on the charge of plunder for Arroyo's alleged malversation of intelligence funds from the Philippine Charitable Sweepstakes Organization (PCSO).

Plunder is an official criminal charge in the Philippines, defined as the criminal acquisition of over 50 million pesos (\$US1.25 million) by a public official, and carries with it minimum sentence of life imprisonment. What is most important for the purposes of the Aquino administration is that plunder is a non-bailable offense. In the same week that Arroyo posted bail, charges were filed against her on which she could not be bailed.

The charges filed against Arroyo are being presented by the Aquino administration and the Philippine media as a campaign against corruption. This is not what is at stake at all. Both charges currently levelled against her

pale before the actual criminality which was carried out during her 9-year tenure in office.

There is a wealth of evidence, for example, that Arroyo cheated in the 2004 presidential election. Presenting a case against her for this, however, would expose the entire corrupt political system in the Philippines, implicating both her and her rivals. Aquino, a congressman when the election fraud scandal broke out in 2005, defended Arroyo, then an ally, against charges that she rigged the election.

The charges filed against Arroyo are at their base not about corruption or poll fraud. They are about the shift during her administration that began to move Philippine economic and political ties away from the United States and toward China.

The Aquino administration, under a great deal of pressure from Washington, has re-oriented the Philippines back firmly in the camp of US imperialism. Internationally this has led to the dramatic escalation of tensions in the South China Sea. Domestically it has been characterized by the prosecution of Arroyo and all of her cronies.

Evidence in the investigation against Arroyo's allies in the military was supplied to the Philippine government by the US State Department. The impeachment of the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, who had defended Arroyo's interests, involved financial records gained through US pressure to "reform" Philippine anti-money laundering laws. At every step in the prosecution of Arroyo, Washington through both military and diplomatic representatives has expressed its support for Aquino's "campaign

against corruption”.

The specific charges currently leveled against Arroyo—plundering the PCSO—expose the rot that runs from top to bottom in Philippine society.

An illegal numbers game operated at the level of the local marketplace, called *jueteng*, is ubiquitous in the Philippines. Small-scale bets are placed daily on the outcome of a numbers drawing. The payoff averages from 400 to 1,000 pesos (\$US10-25). The practice of *jueteng* is so widespread that a reputable survey conducted in 1999 found that in the main island of Luzon alone *jueteng* yielded an annual pay-off of over \$US1 billion. Some 400,000 workers were employed in the illegal numbers racket and 30 percent of the annual *jueteng* yield went into payoffs to police and politicians. Every town, every city, every province has its ‘*jueteng* lord’—a wealthy and much feared political operative and thug. Cross the *jueteng* lord and it is only a matter of time before you end up dead.

The central government was eager to get its hands on a share of the *jueteng* proceeds. Under the auspices of the Philippine Charitable Sweepstakes Organization, they created the Small Town Lottery (STL). The STL was *jueteng* made legal. In most provinces *jueteng* lords simply issued STL licenses to their numbers runners, giving them the cloak of legality.

The PCSO charter is to use the money gained from government-run lotteries for funding medical and social services. PCSO lotteries function as a predatory tax on the working class and the poor who are its sole participants. Much of the PCSO funds then wind up in the pockets of bureaucrats and government functionaries.

One of the authorized expenditures of the PCSO is an intel fund, which is used to track down supposed lottery cheats and the abuse of PCSO medical funds. Arroyo and several of her allies stand charged with dramatically increasing the PCSO intel fund and then either pocketing the money or using it to influence elections.

One of the ways in which the funds were disbursed

under Arroyo was the donation of new Sport Utility Vehicles to Catholic priests in return for their support during elections. This disbursement was not included in the charges against Arroyo, as such gifts were deemed a “secular” donation for the “public good”, and thus both constitutional and legal. The Catholic Church exercises a ubiquitous, quasi-medieval clout over nearly all political decisions made in the Philippines.

Like the previous charges against Arroyo, the charge of plunder was drawn up on Aquino’s behalf by every section of the Philippine pseudo-left. The ex-Maoist party Akbayan, and the Maoist front group Bayan Muna, filed identical but separate plunder charges against Arroyo within days of each other.

Aquino used the charges drawn up by these ex-left groups for the sole purpose of holding Arroyo without bail while he continues to consolidate his political power and, with Washington’s backing, to take an aggressive stance against China in territorial disputes in the South China Sea.



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