

Philippine senators charged in corruption scandal

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Charges have been filed against several high-profile politicians in a corruption scandal that has dominated Philippine news headlines for over two months. The drive to indict the accused, abetted by the mainstream media, is part of a campaign by the administration of President Benigno Aquino III to remove his political opponents and consolidate the authority of the executive branch. At the heart of this power play are the strategic interests of American imperialism in the region, expressed through the Obama administration's "pivot" to Asia.

On Monday last week, senators Juan Ponce Enrile, Ramon Revilla Jr, and Jinggoy Estrada were charged with plunder by the Department of Justice. Several former congressmen, national department officials, non-government organisation (NGO) executives, and their staff are also facing charges of plunder, bribery, and malversation. The accused are part of a first batch of indictments linked to an alleged racket whereby they siphoned millions from their Priority Development Assistance Fund (PDAF) into non-existent infrastructure projects. The PDAF, colloquially known as the "pork barrel," is a lump-sum fund allocated to each member of Congress that functions as a personal cookie jar for the lawmakers and their associates. It figures prominently in the patronage politics so prevalent in the Philippines.

Senators Gregorio Honasan and Ferdinand Marcos Jr, also implicated in the racket, have yet to be charged. However, Justice Secretary Leila de Lima, an Aquino appointee, has made clear that a second and third batch of charges will likely be forthcoming.

Janet Lim-Napoles, a wealthy Manila businesswoman who has been accused of being the mastermind behind the scam, has also been charged with plunder, which is defined as the exploitation of public office to acquire ill-gotten wealth in excess of P50 million (\$US1.16 million). The plunder charge carries a sentence of life imprisonment and lifetime disqualification from holding

public office.

The charge of plunder is often used in political faction fights within the ruling elite to sideline powerful opponents, such as former president Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, Aquino's predecessor and once formidable rival. Since Aquino took office, she has been effectively muzzled by being charged with several offences, including plunder. During her presidency she used the same tactic against her predecessor and one-time running mate, former president Joseph Estrada (father of accused senator Jinggoy Estrada). He was convicted of plunder in 2007, but was granted clemency by Arroyo after he was no longer deemed a threat.

Mainstream media coverage has focused almost exclusively on Lim-Napoles and the three indicted senators. A government report, the Commission on Audit (COA), suggests that almost two thirds of all senators and congressmen abused their PDAF between 2007 and 2009, during Arroyo's presidency. Reports of similar abuses under Aquino have not been released, and De Lima has personally cleared Aquino allies senator Loren Legarda and presidential executive secretary Paquito Ochoa of any wrongdoing, despite evidence of their links to several PDAF abuses.

In the meantime, the Congress, dominated by Aquino's Liberal Party coalition, has scrapped the PDAF and will be transferring its funds to various executive agencies. This effectively places the P25.2 billion (\$US587 million) of the PDAF under the sole jurisdiction of the president, who has stacked national government agencies with his political allies. By comparison, the discretionary funds available to Aquino for various infrastructure projects dwarf the entire PDAF. It is estimated that he has access to roughly P1.3 trillion (\$29.42 billion) in funds, which are doled out at his command.

What is taking place is the political liquidation of Aquino's opponents carried out under the false pretext of

fighting corruption. Since winning the presidency in 2010, he has prosecuted a relentless campaign to consolidate political power against Arroyo, whose Lakas Party, now led by Revilla, lies in tatters. The sidelining of Revilla removes a challenger for the 2016 presidential elections.

The indictment of Enrile marks another chapter in the silencing of the political opposition. For decades, he has been a prominent figure in Philippine politics, and a once influential political powerbroker. He was defence minister under former dictator Ferdinand Marcos Sr, and 41 years ago—on September 21, 1972—orchestrated an ambush on his own entourage as a pretext for the declaration of martial law. In a 1991 television interview, he claimed of his past exploits, “I am the author of martial law.” During the martial law years, he was responsible for the arrests of opposition figures, and is widely acknowledged to have ordered their tortures and extra-judicial executions.

In 1986, after being repeatedly passed over for promotion due to Marcos’s nepotism, Enrile conspired with General Fidel Ramos and then-Lieutenant Colonel Honasan to oust the president and declare himself prime minister. After the “People Power” uprising overthrew Marcos and enthroned the bourgeois plantation owner Corazon Aquino (Benigno’s mother) as president, Enrile and his co-conspirators initially supported her regime. Enrile reprised his position of defence minister.

As it became clear that Aquino could not manoeuvre effectively between rival sections of the bourgeoisie, the disaffected army officers under Honasan launched a series of increasingly bloody coup attempts. Enrile resigned from his post and was directly linked to several of the coup attempts. It is these hawkish sections of the current and former military, along with their business interests, that Enrile continues to represent.

On June 27, Defense Secretary Voltaire Gazmin announced that the Philippine government was drafting new basing arrangements for US troops. The plan would initially give American forces longer access to Philippine military bases, which could be extended to the Japanese military as part of a nascent Pacific military bloc against China. Gazmin claimed that the plans would operate under the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA), a set of guidelines for American troop conduct adhering to the 1951 Philippines-US Mutual Defense Treaty.

The next day, Enrile, Honasan, and other senators from their United Nationalist Alliance (UNA) party objected to the plans, claiming that they were unconstitutional and would lead to an indefinite basing of US troops on Philippine military bases. The VFA stipulates that all

American troop deployments to Philippine installations must be temporary. Enrile further argued that this would create de facto forward bases for potential American combat operations against China.

Enrile and Honasan’s objections are not borne of any principled opposition to Washington’s war preparations against China. Both of them have argued for a more powerful Philippine military, and during the flare up of military tensions with China around the disputed Scarborough Shoals last year, raised a clamour for direct American naval intervention.

Enrile, in his role as defence minister under Ferdinand Marcos, played a central role in supporting and maintaining the US military presence on its bases in the Philippines. In 1991, then senator Enrile opposed the continued stationing of American troops in the Philippines, citing the end of the Cold War. His current opposition to President Benigno Aquino’s base proposals reflects concern within the ruling elite that the government’s actions could limit the Philippines’ ability to manoeuvre between the US—its strategic ally—and China—its main economic partner.

Aquino, under pressure from Washington, is consolidating his grip on power and removing an obstacle to his administration’s support for the US war drive against China. Estrada, one of the co-accused in the PDAF scandal, had gestured at a rapprochement with China over the South China Sea disputes. The timing of the plunder charges against Enrile and company corresponds with their opposition to the new US basing arrangements.



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