Philippine president consolidates power through corruption scandal

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The administration of Philippine President Benigno Aquino is continuing its consolidation of political power. Backed by the Obama administration in Washington, it is using a corruption scandal in the Congress to remove its political opponents and reshape the Senate to its advantage.

Details of a vast kickbacks scam first came to light in July, when prominent opposition senators were accused of pilfering billions from the Priority Development Assistance Fund (PDAF). The PDAF, or "pork barrel" as it is colloquially known, is a 25.4 billion pesos ($US590 million) lump-sum fund divided between individual congressmen and senators. Though intended for public infrastructure and civic projects, it is regularly used for self-aggrandizement and disbursed through a system of political patronage.

Three senators, as well as a number of current and former legislators and their staff, have been charged with plunder, defined as the exploitation of public office to acquire ill-gotten wealth in excess of P50 million. Prominent opposition senators Juan Ponce Enrile, Ramon Revilla Jr, and Jinggoy Estrada, along with their alleged co-conspirator, businesswoman Janet Lim-Napoles, have been the primary targets of the administration's vendetta.

Aquino announced in late August that he would "abolish" the PDAF and channel its funds to six national executive agencies. The House of Representatives approved the 2014 national budget on September 28, which authorizes Aquino's funding realignment.

This latest reform is a sleight of hand. Aquino himself has admitted that legislators will still have the opportunity to identify and promote spending initiatives, leaving the door open to further abuses. The executive agencies to which the funds have been diverted are led by Aquino allies, some of whom have been implicated in the ongoing corruption scandal.

Plunder charges have also been filed against former president Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo for her alleged misuse of P900 million in national oil and gas revenues from the coastal Malampaya gas fields. Until Aquino's presidential win in 2010, Arroyo was the powerful kingpin of Philippine politics. She and her Lakas-CMD political party have now been reduced to parliamentary rumps.

The Aquino administration has committed a similar diversion of the same funds, but calls for action to be taken against it have been muted and limited to the now marginal opposition. Criminal charges cannot be filed against a sitting president.

All but ignored in the myopic coverage of the corporate press has been the hundreds of billions that constitutes the president's own pork barrel. It is estimated that he has access to roughly P1.3 trillion in funds, which are doled out at his sole discretion.

In a desperate act of retaliation, Senator Jinggoy Estrada has accused the Aquino administration of bribing legislators with funds from the Disbursement Acceleration Program (DAP) during last year's impeachment of former Supreme Court Justice Corona, an Arroyo ally. While Senate leader and Aquino ally Franklin Drilon has admitted to parceling out additional funds to senators who voted for Corona's impeachment, he has flatly refused to characterize these as bribes.

Drilon and the Aquino administration have resisted opposition efforts to bring Janet Lim-Napoles in to testify about her alleged role in the PDAF scam at the Senate's blue ribbon committee. Lim and Drilon are thought to be politically connected, and due to Napoles' much-publicized buckling under pressure, it

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is feared that she may expose her possible links to the administration, which have been hinted at but not conclusively proven. Such a revelation would further expose the hypocrisy of the Aquino administration's power grab.

The resulting fallout has forced even administration allies to concede that the creation and disbursement of the DAP is an offense for which Aquino can be impeached. They have been quick, however, to point out that Aquino cannot be slapped with criminal charges, and that his total control of the three branches of government preclude any realistic threat of impeachment. Aquino has dismissed these allegations with the arrogance of an executive who exercises complete dominance over the government and enjoys Washington's full backing. At a press conference on October 3, Aquino dared his opponents, "Go ahead, impeach me."

Aquino's consolidation of power has seen the removal of his political opponents in the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government. He has accomplished this by deploying a combination of corruption charges, impeachment proceedings and arrests. In addition, the selective disbursement of the PDAF was used to broker alliances with factions of the ruling class who were previously his political opponents.

This realignment of ruling class forces in the Philippines is directly bound up with the Obama administration's "pivot" to Asia. Before his 2010 presidential run, Aquino was a no-name senator, whose only claim to prominence was his status as the son of former president Corazon Aquino and the assassinated former senator Benigno Aquino Sr. Before she died, the former president Aquino publicly endorsed her son's campaign. Residual public approval for the late president, built over the years by papering over her many crimes against the working class and peasantry, helped catapult her son into power.

Washington has actively cultivated him as a proxy for its interests in the region against its foremost rival in the region, China. The Obama administration has enthusiastically endorsed his bogus "Daang Matuwid" (Righteous Path) anti-corruption platform. It has also supplied evidence through the American embassy, FBI, and State Department to help bury Aquino's opponents.

While Arroyo had shifted the country economically and diplomatically closer to China, Aquino's term has been marked by a series of hostile standoffs with Beijing. The US administration has encouraged the Aquino administration to take an aggressive stance against China's claims on islets in the disputed South China Sea. This rampant brinksmanship led in May to the killing of a Taiwanese fisherman by the Philippine Coast Guard. A series of other military standoffs have occurred with growing frequency in the disputed waters.

Washington has also been in negotiations with the Aquino administration to fundamentally restructure the terms of its military basing agreement, with the aim of creating de facto forward operating bases for US military forces.

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