

Impeachment Revelations Could Doom Philippine Chief Justice
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By Our Correspondent

Ombudsman springs unexpected details of bank accounts

The appearance earlier this week by Ombudsman Conchita Carpio-Morales at the impeachment trial of Supreme Court Justice Renato Corona may well have delivered testimony too damaging for Corona to recover.

The impeachment trial has been underway for months, after the House of Representatives voted an impeachment bill against him last Dec. 12. Despite the fact that the impeachment originated in the legislature, it is universally regarded as a campaign on the part of President Benigno S. Aquino III to drive the chief justice from the court because Corona is the most important defender of former President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, whom Aquino has pledged to jail on corruption charges.

The gamble by Corona's lawyers to call Carpio-Morales, a former colleague of Corona's, as an adverse and hostile witness, appears to have exploded in the lawyers' faces. Carpio-Morales was allowed, by a unanimous vote, to present a detailed PowerPoint presentation from the Philippines Anti-Money Laundering Council on Corona's alleged dollar accounts and their attendant transactions. The vote was the first of its kind for the Senate Impeachment Court instigated by Sen. Miriam Santiago, who is perceived to be sympathetic to Corona.

Carpio-Morales detailed 82 US dollar accounts and more than US\$12 million in what she called "fresh deposits" that had never moved in the account. Why the Senate, sitting as an impeachment court, voted to allow the presentation can only be put down to its members' curiosity because until Carpio-Morales waved the 17-page document from the Anti-Money Laundering Council (AMLC), nobody among them had any inkling about the intricate web of transactions involving Corona's dollar accounts.

The spectacular testimony considerably raises the pressure on Corona himself to testify before the Senate. The defense had previously claimed that the weak evidence presented so far in the case didn't require him to appear personally, which seemed increasingly possible as prosecutors were forced to scale back their allegations of the chief justice's holdings. Now, however, there appears to be little excuse for Corona's defense team to explain away their client's multimillion dollar deposits without putting him on the witness stand.

Corona's lawyers had sought to keep him off the stand, claiming doing so would only add to the drama of the hearings. However, allowing the chief justice to testify would be a gamble, in part because of the unique circumstances of an impeachment trial, which does not allow defense objections against particular lines of questioning. Corona would be forced to answer.

Other analysts point out that Corona is an extremely experienced lawyer and judge who should be able to take care of himself under close questioning.

By calling Carpio-Morales to the stand, the defense panel had hoped to buttress its claim that the chief justice's impeachment was the result of a political vendetta and a virulent attack on Corona by Aquino. However, Carpio Morales' possession of the money-laundering report

caught the defense off guard. They never knew the extent or the details of the Ombudsman's investigation into their client's dollar account deposits. When waved the copy, defense lead counsel Serafin Cuevas, a former Supreme Court associate justice like Carpio-Morales, apparently forgot to get the details of the document, which was the subject of a subpoena.

Carpio-Morales could still be swayed by both the prosecution and the impeachment court to testify beyond Corona's dollar accounts.

Corona may yet be able to spring surprises to his favor. After all, he has not rested his case. But frankly, is there really a way out for Corona? He already crossed his Rubicon. The way forward may be is just to fade quietly into the horizon. That, too, may no longer be an option for him given the way things took a turn for the worse for him. The game may be over.

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