

**Philippine Impeachment Trial Recesses**  
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**By Our Correspondent**

*Thwarted from questioning court employees, prosecutors gamble they have enough on Chief Justice Corona already*

Frustrated by a Supreme Court ruling preventing employees and members of the high court to testify or appear, the Philippine Senate Impeachment Tribunal Tuesday cut its impeachment case short against Chief Justice Renato Corona, leaving President Benigno Aquino III with a gamble on whether the government will win a conviction.

The prosecution dropped five articles of impeachment against the chief justice, saying the case would hinge on testimony already presented in three articles detailing allegations of undue wealth, accusations that the chief justice had used his office to overturn decisions on behalf of cronies, and that he had used his power to protect former President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, who pleaded not guilty last week with rigging 2007 senatorial elections. Arroyo appointed Corona to the court after he had served as her press secretary and went on to a legal career. She later elevated him to the chief justice job.

Guilty or not, Corona has very much become a pawn in the contest between Aquino and Arroyo, both members of the country's oldest and most powerful political clans. During attempts to impeach Arroyo when she was president, the Aquinos were among the leaders of the movement that sought her resignation. Aquino in turn has not got over the fact that the Arroyos pulled out all the stops to attempt to thwart his run for the presidency in 2010, which he won convincingly on an anti-corruption platform.

Gloria and her husband, Miguel are now trying to portray themselves as being persecuted after the former president was denied her basic right to travel, including her right to proper medical care.

Senate President Juan Ponce Enrile, the impeachment court's presiding officer, ruled that the trial will recess for two weeks, after which defense lawyers are expected to seek to rebut the claims presented in the first three article of impeachment during the 25-day trial. During the hiatus, the prosecution is expected to formally submit its evidence. After the rebuttal claims, the Senate will have a week to decide what evidence will be admitted to the impeachment court.

Although impeachment is supposed to be a formal process in which evidence is heard and either discarded or admitted as a function of the legislature and not the presidency, Aquino has bet considerable prestige on driving Corona from the court. As is often the case in the Philippines, the final analysis will come down to the political question of who has the most clout. So far, Aquino has held most of the cards.

Last year, Corona led a court ruling that the president had no power to bar Arroyo from leaving the country for medical treatment because no charge had been filed against her. That led to a standoff at Manila's Ninoy Aquino International Airport involving Arroyo, wearing an elaborate neck brace because of a reputed and highly suspect rare bone disease, and Philippine immigration officials who stopped her from leaving the country.

Aquino filed charges against Arroyo for corruption and ordered her detained, risking a contempt charge by the Supreme Court. However, the court then resuscitated an old claim by farmer groups against the Cojuanco family's vast Hacienda Luisita property in northern Luzon. Aquino's mother, Corazon, was a member of the Cojuanco family.

Corona has been badly damaged by testimony indicating he had influenced the high court to reverse some of its decisions to aid special interests and that he had declined to properly declare his assets, hiding millions of pesos in real estate and bank accounts from his Statements of Assets, Liabilities and Net Worth or SALNs.

The Commissioner of Internal Revenue, Kim Jacinto-Henares, personally testified on Feb. 6 that Corona had failed to include at least nine properties in his conflict of interest statements and that there were discrepancies in his income tax returns.

Jacinto-Henares' testimony is interesting. If the Senate were to fail to impeach Corona and drive him from the court, the internal revenue investigation of his tax returns and properties could provide another avenue for the Aquino Administration to prosecute the chief justice. The internal revenue agency is one of those tasked with investigating government officials accused of corruption. Corona's tax records could provide the basis for a probe against the chief justice and his family.

Two Supreme Court employees, a driver and a security guard, were already in the holding room of the Philippine Senate after they were subpoenaed to testify against Corona when apparently they were informed of the court's refusal to allow its employees to testify. They left and did not come back.

House of Representatives prosecutor Neri Colmenares said the two would have given credence to allegation that the Chief Justice used his office to favor former president Gloria Macapagal Arroyo on Nov. 15, when the court issued the temporary restraining order against the department of justice that would have allowed Arroyo to travel to Singapore, supposedly to seek treatment for her bone degeneration, which appeared never to have bothered her in public before it became apparent that she might be charged with crimes.

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