

**Philippine Chief Justice is Ousted**  
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**By Our Correspondent**

*Senate impeachment court convicts Corona*

The Philippine Senate, with an overwhelming 20-3 vote to impeach Chief Justice Renato Corona, has handed President Benigno S. Aquino the biggest victory of his presidential reign, which began in July of 2010.

Corona, removed on charges he had failed to declare \$2.4 million in foreign currency deposits, is the first public official ever to be ousted by an impeachment court. His ouster from the 15-member court, while ostensibly a legislative act, nonetheless was engineered by Aquino and it puts the president one step closer to bringing down his chief target, former President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, whom he has vowed to bring to justice.

For international investors, the completion of the impeachment trial can probably be regarded as a healthy sign that Aquino is committed to cleaning out the corruption stables. But the bigger question is how to translate his campaign against Arroyo and by extension Corona into success in a country where corruption is endemic, and along with it impunity for corrupted officials caught with their hands in the till. The country ranks 125th on Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index. Tea money is required at virtually every step of any process having to do with government.

Corona, who was elevated to chief justice as one of the last acts of Arroyo's reign, was the former president's chief defender and, Aquino's supporters said, would have been a major obstacle in Aquino's efforts to prosecute her. Losing the impeachment case would have left an implacable enemy for Aquino in a position to block any of the government's initiatives. It would also have demonstrated palpable weakness on the part of the administration.

In the end, Corona faced only three of the eight articles filed by the House of Representatives. Article 2 alleged that the chief justice had betrayed the public trust and/or committed culpable violation of the Constitution for his failure to disclose properties and bank accounts in his statements of assets, liabilities and net worth from 2003 to 2010. Another article alleged that he had failed to act with competence, integrity and independence in discharging his duties as the country's top magistrate. The third, Article 7, accused Corona of favoring ex-President Arroyo in decisions by the supreme court.

Corona had charged that the impeachment trial was a vendetta initiated by Aquino in retaliation for court rulings that mandated the breakup of the controversial Hacienda Luisita, the vast Aquino family plantation that previous courts had ordered to be handed over to workers as a result of land reforms dating back to the presidential reign of Aquino's late mother, Corazon.

The Supreme Court under Corona's jurisdiction ruled that Arroyo could leave the country for suspect medical care last November, leading to a dramatic confrontation at Manila's international airport, named for Aquino's assassinated father Ninoy, in which officials stopped the former president from leaving. She has been charged with vote fraud dating back to her 2004 presidential election. She remains under hospital arrest.

The impeachment trial was marked with high drama and general high emotion as well as breaks for medical checkups, as only a Philippine trial could be. Corona put on a vigorous defense, challenging the entire legislature -- senators and representatives as well -- to make public their own statements of assets and liabilities. He spoke in Tagalog rather than English, an indication that he was talking directly to the Philippine people rather than to the Senate. At times he broke into tears, weaving in personal attacks against his enemies and telling stories about the struggles his family faced.

He insisted that under the law he was not required to disclose the money in his accounts. His testimony was marked by emotional outbursts and one episode where he simply got up and left the trial, only to be cornered before he could leave the building and brought back in a wheelchair, . He later apologized but said he needed medical attention, which brought up references to Gloria Arroyo, whose various peregrinations in a wheelchair, wearing a heavy neck brace supposedly for a degenerative bone disease that could only be treated outside the country, have been ridiculed as faked.

In the end, none of it worked. In a legislature where decisions are made on the basis of political clout rather than the merits of issues, a 20-3 vote can probably be interpreted as an indication that Noynoy Aquino's clout is growing.

Earlier concerns, for instance, that a dilatory president was concentrating on nailing Gloria instead of paying attention to governing -- especially having cancelled several vitally important infrastructure projects because he wanted to ensure transparency in the bid process, However, the National Economic Development Authority recently announced it had approved five infrastructure projects including two from the government's priority project list and has upped the priority list of public-private projects from 16 to 22, including four rail projects, requiring expenditure of P352 billion (US\$8.2 billion).

The latest announcement involved projects worth P32.7 billion. Tender dates have been set for a further seven of the projects, a sign that maybe the country is going to do something about the woeful state of its infrastructure -- and do it in a relatively transparent and honest process.

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