

**A Crucial Political Test for Aquino in the Philippines**  
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**By Our Correspondent**

*Chief Justice Corona's impeachment trial resumes, perhaps not a sure thing after all*

This week the Philippine Senate returned from recess to once again take up the impeachment of Chief Justice Renato Corona on charges of corruption. Despite the fact that the impeachment trial is being conducted by the Senate, it was engineered by President Benigno S. Aquino III, and it is of crucial importance to his presidency.

If Corona is found not guilty or if a deal is worked out, anything short of complete removal from his position would almost certainly be a devastating blow to the presidency and would leave in office an arch-enemy closely aligned with former President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, the main target that Noyonoy Aquino is attempting to defang.

So far, Aquino has been picking off Arroyo's allies one by one. Arroyo herself was arrested last November in her hospital bed on charges of vote fraud after being denied permission to leave the country for medical care after a dramatic face-down at Manila's international airport. She had been given permission to leave through a Supreme Court order that nullified a travel ban placed on her by the government.

House of Representatives prosecutors in Corona's impeachment trial alleged that he had used his position as chief justice to rule in favor of corporations and individuals who had paid him millions for his decisions, and that he had shown bias in his decisions in favor of Arroyo, who had appointed him after he had served as her spokesperson and chief of staff. He was originally appointed to the court in 2002 by Arroyo and elevated to the chief justiceship in a controversial appointment just two days after Aquino's election to succeed her, and a month before her term ended.

When the Senate received the articles of impeachment from the House of Representatives and began the trial on Jan. 16, it was assumed that Corona's ouster was a sure thing.

"Now, I'm not quite sure," said a veteran political analyst in Manila. I still think he would be but anything can happen at the last minute. I'm not quite able to read what the senators really want, so I am guessing some sort of horse-trading is about to happen."

One of the big problems is the banking secrecy laws in the Philippines, which are every bit as stiff as those in a variety of Caribbean islands. The laws make the mere inquiry into the accounts of an individual punishment by up to five years in prison. Thus despite the fact that officials possess leaked records showing Corona allegedly amassed millions of dollars in ill-gotten funds, they may not be admissible in court.

Rappler, the Manila-based news website, earlier reported that the chief justice had P20 million (US\$475,000) on deposit in one account and P12 million in another. The website has detailed a long list of other accounts as well. The Office of the Ombudsman has alleged that Corona has at least US\$10 million in deposits, gaining access to the accounts despite the bank secrecy laws allegedly through a waiver Corona had signed in his Statement of Assets, Liabilities and Net Worth, which is required of public figures. Corona has disputed the

veracity of the Ombudsman's allegations, describing them as "phony."

The Foreign Currency Deposits Act states that "foreign currency accounts are considered of an absolutely confidential nature and except upon written permission of the depositor, in no instance shall foreign currency deposits be examined, ignored or looked into by any person, government official, bureau or office whether judicial or administrative or legislative, or any other entity whether public or private."

Earlier in the trial, the Supreme Court issued a temporary restraining order barring the Philippine Savings Bank from disclosing information about Corona's accounts, restating the basic tenet of the law. The impeachment court remains at odds with the court. With the ability to introduce the accounts as evidence in question, that has left the impeachment panel relatively little to go on other than property.

Senate prosecutors, observers in Manila say, have done a relatively poor job of presenting the case against the chief justice. Claims of 44 properties and massive undeclared assets have been consistently downgraded. The number of properties has been cut in half. In many cases, it's unclear whether the properties belonged to Corona, family members or whether titles had been transferred from previous owners.

The properties that have been identified as Corona's or his wife's aren't lavish villas – like many of those owned by the politicians putting him on trial. The premier property is a condo in the high-end Fort Bonifacio district of Manila but the building isn't one of the most exclusive in the area. Prosecutors claim, however, that even that property is too steep for Corona to afford in his capacity as a public servant – a measly P46,200, less than US\$1,100.

Ultimately the trial is decided by the members of the Senate, sitting as judges, rather than on the preponderance of the evidence – or the lack of it. They can remove the chief justice without explanation and without appeal. He is widely assumed by the public to be guilty as charged.

What kind of horse trading might be going on behind the scenes is unknown. Senate leaders have announced their intention of getting the trial out of the way before the end of the month, before they recess again. Whatever evidence is presented, it will probably come down to a test of Noynoy Aquino's power as president – his ability to deliver up deals to key Senate officers that will swing their votes. If he loses that test of strength, it is likely that his presidency will be hamstrung as long as he is in office.

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