

Philippine Senate holds hearing on corruption scandal

By Joseph Santolan
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Months of simmering corruption scandals in the Philippines came to a head Thursday as Janet Napoles Lim was called to testify before a Blue Ribbon committee hearing of the Senate. She is the alleged mastermind behind a network of legislators, political operatives and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) involved in the purported theft of billions of pesos in government discretionary funds.

Prosecutors from the Department of Justice in President Benigno Aquino's administration have accused Napoles Lim, along with three sitting senators, five former congressmen and five ex-government agency chiefs, of engaging in the theft of public funds through a system of phony NGOs. Every individual congressperson and senator receives a portion of the Priority Development Assistance Fund (PDAF), a lump sum discretionary spending allowance. In 2012, \$US590 million was allotted to PDAF and divided up among the legislators, ostensibly for spending on public infrastructure and social projects.

PDAF and other forms of so-called pork barrel funds are routinely disbursed as the means of maintaining political patronage or pocketed for personal enrichment. Occasionally one section of the bourgeoisie will lift the lid off a portion of this venality to precipitate a corruption scandal as a means of struggling to wrest power from a rival section of the ruling class.

The faction fight waged over the PDAF in the past two months has revealed yet again the thorough rot of bourgeois politics. It is no exaggeration to say that not a single political figure of any party in either the executive branch or the legislature who has not been exposed as complicit in the web of bribery and patronage.

What makes the PDAF scandal potentially far more

explosive than the countless previous corruption scandals is the geopolitical context in which it occurs. Over the past three years, President Aquino has come to function as a spearhead for Washington's aggressive 'pivot to Asia' against China. He has used backing from Washington to carry out a coordinated campaign to consolidate power at the expense of his political rivals, always using accusations of corruption. Various US political and diplomatic representatives have supplied both evidence and public support for Aquino's "fight against corruption."

The PDAF scandal emerged out of Aquino's attempt to wrest control from his political rivals of their last bastion—the Senate. When then Senate president Juan Ponce Enrile declared that he regarded the tentative arrangement being negotiated by the Aquino administration for basing US troops in the country as 'unconstitutional,' accusations of the theft of PDAF funds broke in the press. The Department of Justice prepared plunder charges against Enrile, and two other leading rivals of Aquino—Senators Jinggoy Estrada and Ramon 'Bong' Revilla.

Since Obama's cancellation of his long-scheduled trip to the Philippines and crucial regional summits in early October during the US government shutdown, Aquino's rivals have hit back. Counter charges of corruption have been brought against the Aquino administration, alleging that he misused his presidential discretionary funds, known as the Disbursement Acceleration Program (DAP).

At the center of the charges and counter-charges is the figure of Janet Napoles Lim, who is accused by a host of former employees and 'whistleblowers' of establishing a network of 21 bogus NGOs through which legislators laundered their pork barrel funds. Allegedly, Napoles would then allocate 50 percent of

the PDAF funds back to the lawmaker, 35 percent to herself, 10 percent to the operator of the bogus NGO, and 5 percent to the lawmakers' chiefs of staff.

At the head of those testifying against Napoles and the accused legislators is former employee Benhur Luy. He declared that Napoles held him hostage for over a month in a bid to prevent him from testifying.

The charged atmosphere during Napoles's testimony at the hearing in the Senate on Thursday is the product of months of mudslinging. When Senator Estrada, for example, was threatened with plunder charges he responded in a privilege speech before the Senate, in which he pointedly asked, "Why have you singled me out?" Every Senator, he stated, had accepted discretionary funds disbursement as a form of patronage and bribery.

He cited the vote by 20 senators to impeach then Chief Justice of the Supreme Court Renato Corona in 2012. Every senator who voted to impeach Corona, he claimed, received an additional 50 million pesos (over \$US1 million) in discretionary funds from leading Aquino ally, Senator Franklin Drilon. Drilon subsequently confirmed this disbursement, but claimed it was "not a bribe" because it was paid "after the vote."

Napoles arrived on Thursday with a large group of government security personnel and wearing a bullet proof vest. The proceedings were broadcast live on national television. The hearing was a soap opera of heated accusations and threats. Senator Miriam Defensor Santiago led most of the proceedings. She has been a sharp-tongued, political loose cannon for years. She alternates between enmity and alliance with nearly every political figure. Her legislative grandstanding has often inadvertently exposed the sordid machinations of the Philippine state. Thursday's proceedings were no exception.

Napoles repeatedly refused to testify, invoking her right not to incriminate herself. When Santiago was unable to get Napoles to testify through legal badgering, she resorted to threat and insinuation. "Tell the truth before the senators affected have you assassinated, that is your path to safety. Many people want you dead. That's why I'm telling you as a lawyer to tell us what you want to say so that they can no longer have you killed."

When Napoles still refused to testify, Santiago

announced that she knew that one of the parties involved was Enrile, and that Enrile was intending to assassinate Napoles.

Enrile issued a statement to the press after the hearing. "I feel compelled to issue a statement on today's Senate hearing lest my silence in the face of the most outrageous allegations will be construed against me," he said. "I support any investigation that seeks to uncover the truth about this PDAF scam." He denounced Santiago's statements as "wild-eyed charges, baseless assumptions."

The entire Blue Ribbon soap opera, featuring an investigative committee whose every member stands in some way complicit in the crime being investigated, was marked by hypocrisy and increasing desperation. There is growing class hostility among the working masses not just against pork barreling, but the entire political establishment. The mudslinging and power struggles of the bourgeoisie have exposed the entire disgusting apparatus for personal enrichment and class repression, that constitutes the Philippine state.

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