

Philippines: Power, secrecy, and the politics of hypocrisy

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“If you’ve been in government long enough, you’ll have seen many of these,” said President Marcos the other day by way of downplaying the abrupt ouster of Pampanga representative and former president Gloria Macapagal Arroyo (GMA) from her position as senior deputy speaker of the House of Representatives. “It’s just part of the reorganization.”

But what a way to treat a major ally who had played a key role in forging the formidable Marcos-Duterte partnership! The shabby treatment of the former president seems totally inconsistent with the impression one gets from merely looking at front-page photos. Arroyo has been a regular member of the Marcos entourage on all the foreign trips that this itinerant president has made in the past 12 months. As a trusted adviser, she sat in the same chartered plane, stayed in the same five-star hotels, and presumably participated in the same intimate huddles with the President as Speaker Martin Romualdez, the man who had just unceremoniously fired her as senior deputy speaker.

While Romualdez himself has kept a discreet silence, Arroyo has been more voluble. After tersely saying “This is the prerogative of the House,” she issued a long follow-up statement that offers a rare glimpse into the complex interests that are at play in today’s evolving political scene.

Clearly, she was given no forewarning of her impending demotion to mere deputy speaker, which, in terms of formal power, may not mean much. It is the signal it gives that matters —that, henceforth, GMA is no longer part of the President’s (and the Speaker’s) inner circle.

She says as much in her statement. “Outside of my role as Congresswoman, my public interest going forward is to help reduce tensions between the United States and China, given that I was strongly allied to both countries when I was President ... This time, I am a mere Congresswoman, so issues of national importance no longer depend on my role in Congress.”

Mr. Marcos has warned against reading too much into these developments. But one can’t help noting how Arroyo has particularized her role in this administration. By zeroing in on the need to reduce US-China tensions, she appears to be conveying her personal apprehensions about this administration’s sharp pivot to America. She’s telling Marcos that he needs someone like her to help him manage the delicate balancing act between the US and China.

She dismissed suspicions that she was plotting a coup against the present Speaker. While she was interested, she said, in becoming Speaker after the 2022 elections, she quickly gave this up when Mr. Marcos chose his first cousin Martin Romualdez to lead the House of Representatives. She stressed that her current political concerns go beyond the parochial and the perennial jockeying for power in Congress, assuring her colleagues that she’s no longer interested in the speakership.

Trust Arroyo to find virtue in necessity. But no clear-eyed observer of Philippine politics can fail to see in this power play the smoldering resentment of a discontented ally. She might not have been maneuvering to oust Romualdez, her Lakas party-mate, but she was evidently holding her own caucuses in a bid to cement her grip on power in the current administration. "Indeed, some of my actions may have been misconstrued, such as my recent trip with a delegation of Congressmen to Korea for some official meetings."

While she's widely seen as Vice President Sara Duterte's chief mentor, and someone to reckon with should the young Duterte become president in 2028, Arroyo knows that she can't wait that long. Duterte took the move against her mentor as an arrow aimed at her own presidential ambition and promptly resigned from the Lakas-CMD party. The realignments have clearly begun, but their final shape will probably become clearer in the run-up to the 2025 midterm election.

Why Arroyo, a shrewd politician and survivor of countless power struggles, acted so early and rather clumsily is quite puzzling. "Secrecy lies at the very core of power," writes Elias Canetti in his book "Crowds and Power." "The act of lying in wait for prey is essentially secret ... But in order to achieve success in the end the watcher must be capable of endless patience. If this breaks a moment too soon, everything will have been in vain and, weighed down with disappointment, he must start again from the beginning."

In contrast, the younger and less experienced Romualdez has shown more cunning. He has allowed his people to quietly execute the maneuver and issue the cryptic announcement of Arroyo's demotion. Canetti would have applauded: "The power of remaining silent is always highly valued. It means being able to resist the innumerable provocations to speech, treating questions as though they had never been put ... It is voluntary dumbness."

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P.S.

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