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Former Philippines president Arroyo pleads not guilty to poll fraud

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MANILA, PHILIPPINES -- Gloria Arroyo pleaded not guilty Thursday to charges of election fraud [1] at a Pasay City regional court south of Manila.

The former president, now serving as elected House Representative for Pampanga province's second district, has been charged of electoral sabotage for allegedly ordering the tampering of official election returns in the 2007 senatorial elections in which her candidates eventually won.

Arroyo, 64, became president in January 2001 after President Joseph Estrada was forced out by a people's mass protest against his aborted impeachment trial for allegedly accepting bribes. Arroyo, then vice president, assumed the presidency and ran for the position in 2004. She claimed victory in disputed elections.

Three impeachment complaints against her did not pass in the House of Representatives, which is composed mostly of her allies. A bishop, clergy and religious supported the complaints [2]. She faces a maximum sentence of life in prison.

In a statement, Arroyo denied the charges and said there is a "continuous and massive vilification campaign against me and my family."

President Benigno Aquino's critics have accused him of neglecting the economy and important concerns [3] to focus on pinning down Arroyo and her allies.

Vowing to fight the charges, Arroyo said she was submitting to the legal process "to clear my name."

Authorities arrested Arroyo in a hospital in November after a failed attempt to leave the country for treatment for a spine condition.
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Edwin Lacierda, spokesperson for Aquino, welcomed the arraignment, calling it a "small step" in the government's quest for truth, honesty and justice.
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Lacierda told reporters the arraignment would prevent Arroyo from leaving the country for treatment and possibly fleeing for good.

Aquino earlier said his predecessor's trial is a vital step toward his administration's goal of cleaning up public service of graft and corrupt practices. "Straight path" was his campaign battle cry.
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Around this time in 1986, "people power" [4] drove the "dictator" Ferdinand Marcos and his family out of the Philippines and to Hawaii. Where did that pursuit of one leader bring us? It may have been necessary then, but it certainly was not enough.

In this new wave of lawsuits, there must be some other things the Filipino government and people should be avoiding or doing in the bigger context so the country can be on that elusive "straight path," unlike the last 26 years.

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