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Philippines impeachment: hell, fury and a mystery 'coup d'etat'

N.J. Viehland | Mar. 6, 2012 NCR Today

MANILA, Philippines -- Filipinos should resist believing stories about a brewing coup against President Benigno Aquino III, said Archbishop Jose Palma, president of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines.

Allegations of military unrest [1] are obscure, Palma said Tuesday at the CBCP's Permanent Council Meeting, and rumors just complicate the situation and sow fear among people.

Rumors of the coup started circulating Monday, when ex-Navy officer Sen. Antonio Trillanes IV, who led a 2003 mutiny against then-president Gloria Arroyo, said retired Armed Forces officers have been recruiting military personnel since last year for a plot to overthrow Aquino to stop his anti-corruption drive. Ex-generals have challenged Trillanes to name supposed coup plotters [2].
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The allegation comes during a pause in the trial of Chief Justice Renato Corona, who is charged with betrayal of public trust by misdeclaring his assets and of blocking an investigation of fraud charges against former President Gloria Arroyo.

On March 1, prosecutors rested their case and said they would not be presenting evidence on five of the eight complaints brought against Corona. Sen. Miriam Defensor Santiago berated prosecutors in a speech [3], calling them "foolish" for filing "frivolous" complaints and accusing them of "bad faith."

Her charge of prosecutors' bad faith seemed serious and reasonable enough to have driven respected veteran political analyst Amando Doronila to warn media colleagues against allowing themselves to be used for trial by publicity and pre-judging the case [4].

Also during the trial's lull, senator-judges voted to accept as evidence Corona bank account documents the defense had sought to suppress [5]. Senators ruled they were neither fake nor illegally acquired.

The impeachment trial is taking place on two fronts: inside the Senate building with senators sitting as judges and outside the structure in Pasay City, south of Manila.

Public opinion is "under construction" 24/7 through newspapers, the "airwaves" and cyberspace; in sports clubs, hotel forum venues and armed forces camps; in classrooms, churches or wherever friends and family gather, at

least around Manila.

Palma expressed hope "people won?t be susceptible into believing" coup rumors.

Undue stress is the last thing this conflicted society needs. In the last few days, it has taken so little to agitate people and supply the media with charged exchanges involving lawyers, public officials and even priests.

Santiago on Monday lambasted Jesuit Fr. Catalino Arevalo, the theologian who had served as consultant to the Vatican's International Theological Commission [6]. She accused him of political motives in his Saturday homily in which the priest said Santiago was worthy of the fires of hell [7] for calling prosecutors fools during the impeachment trial.

Arevalo based the remark on the Mass' Gospel reading from Matthew 5:22: "But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment. And if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council. And if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the fires of hell."

Arevalo said Santiago should apologize. Instead, the senator shot back at Arevalo, noting close ties with Aquino's family and his role as spiritual director to Benigno's mother, late President Corazon Aquino. Santiago told the priest to steer clear of politics and focus instead on fighting the problem of pedophilia in the church.

Meanwhile, priest and blogger Oblate Fr. Eliseo Mercado Jr. is getting his share of reprimand for a blog he wrote titled "Collapse of the impeachment game?" [8]

One commentator accused him of using "religious position to persuade Catholics to follow your political bias as Gospel truth."

Mercado wrote that many people are beginning to wonder "whether we are beginning to see the end game of the impeachment trial even before the defense begins presenting their witnesses."

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