NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Former Philippines president out on bail on 'weak' charge

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QUEZON CITY, Philippines -- Former Philippines President Gloria Arroyo has left hospital detention [1] and gone home to her residence in La Vista Village here after a Philippines court granted her petition for bail.

Pasay City Regional Trial Court Judge Jesus Mupas allowed Arroyo, now congresswoman of Pampanga, to post a 1 million peso ($23,727) bail. The judge ruled the government's case of election sabotage against the former president "weak." [2]

Arroyo, 65, was arrested in November at St. Luke's Hospital in Taguig City. Immigration authorities had earlier prevented her from leaving the country, supposedly to seek treatment abroad for a spinal ailment, to keep her from fleeing to avoid prosecution.

Arroyo has been charged [3] with electoral sabotage for allegedly conspiring with a politician in the southern Philippines to rig the 2007 senatorial elections.

She had been detained in Veterans Memorial Medical Center [4] while awaiting trial.

The court ruling on the petition for bail said the prosecution failed to prove that Arroyo was involved in a conspiracy to cheat in the polls. At her arraignment, she said she was prepared to go to trial to clear her name.

Her lawyer, Ferdinand Topacio, told reporters after the ruling, issued Wednesday, that it was "a triumph of justice" and proved his client was innocent.

However, the court said Arroyo would still have to stand trial and that she is not allowed to leave the country.

President Benigno Aquino III's spokesman, Edwin Lacierda, told reporters [2] the president's office had nothing to do with the case filed by the Commission on Elections.

Lacierda noted that the judge decided only on the petition for bail and not the merits of the case. He said the executive department was leaving it to lawyers to pursue Arroyo's case.

Arroyo has also been charged with corruption in approving a contract to set up a national government broadband system and with plunder for alleged misuse of $8 million from Philippine Charity Sweepstakes Office funds.

The court ruling was issued about a week after another Arroyo lawyer, at the weekly forum co-sponsored by the Catholic Media Network [5], appealed for prayers for the former president as she awaited the court's decision on bail.

"I was asked by the President [Arroyo] to attend this forum to make a plea to the bishops to please help her pray for courage to accept the things she could no longer change," Attorney Anacleto Diaz told the forum [6].

Diaz said Arroyo also asked him to ask bishops' prayers for the ombudsman and the courts as they decided cases against the former president.

Retired Archbishop Oscar Cruz, the only bishop at the forum, responded by asking Diaz to convey to Arroyo that he would pray for her and Aquino.

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