

Philippine court clears Arroyo of plunder

By Teresa Cerojano
The Associated Press

MANILA, The Philippines — The Philippine Supreme Court has dismissed a plunder case against former President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo and ordered her freed immediately after years of hospital detention — a decision the grateful ex-leader indicated can help her deal with those who “through self-serving interpretation and implementation of the law” made her suffer.

The 15 justices voted 11-4 to grant Arroyo’s petition seeking to dismiss the case before the special anti-graft Sandiganbayan court because of insufficient evidence, Supreme Court spokesman Theodore Te said. The case involved the alleged misuse of 366 million pesos (\$7.8 million) from the state lottery agency, the Philippine Charity Sweepstakes Office.

Arroyo thanked the court “for finally stopping the persecution I had unjustly gone through the last five years” and President Rodrigo Duterte “for allowing due process to take its course.”

She released a statement while still detained in the hospital, with the serving of the court’s order for an immediate release apparently delayed by paperwork.

“It is my fervent hope that nobody else will suffer the persecution that had been levied on me through self-serving interpretation and implementation of the law,” she said. “And that the disregard for truth for which I was made to suffer be dealt with accordingly at the soonest possible time.”

Jesus Dureza, who had been Arroyo’s adviser on peace talks with communist and Muslim rebels, told reporters: “I rejoice over this decision that has already given her what she rightly deserves, which is justice.”

Dureza said he congratulated Arroyo in a phone call and heard many supporters in the background as she spoke. Dureza was reappointed as peace talks adviser under the current president, Rodrigo Duterte, who added a number of Arroyo allies to his cabinet.

Arroyo, 69, finished her tumultuous nine-year term in 2010, but was arrested the following year on an election fraud charge, for which she was allowed to post bail. She was later charged with plunder. Despite her detention, she was re-elected to congress in May. She stayed in a hospital rather than a prison because of her degenerative lumbar spine disease and neck ailment that prompted her to use a wheelchair and brace in public.

Arroyo was detained under former President Benigno Aquino III, who accused her of corruption and misrule. Aquino’s successor, Duterte, however, has said the plunder case against her was weak. Arroyo rejected Duterte’s offer of a pardon because it would require that she be first convicted, preferring to fight the allegation.

A daughter of a former Philippine president and a classmate of former U.S. President Bill Clinton at Georgetown University, Arroyo had been a senator and vice president before suddenly rising to the presidency in 2001 after then-President Joseph Estrada was ousted in a revolt she helped lead.

She won regular elections in 2004, but her presidency was rocked by a series of corruption and vote-rigging scandals, including wiretapped conversations with an election official where some alleged she discussed ensuring her vote lead. Arroyo admitted talking to an election official and apologized for her “lapse in



CASE DISMISSED. Former Philippine President and now congresswoman Gloria Macapagal Arroyo smiles beside her neck brace during the opening session of the Philippine Congress where President Rodrigo Duterte delivered his first state of the nation address at the House of Representatives in suburban Quezon city north of Manila, the Philippines. The Philippine Supreme Court dismissed the plunder charge against former President Arroyo, ordering her immediate release from hospital detention. (AP Photo/Aaron Favila)

judgement” in making such a call, but said the conversation occurred after the votes had been counted.

Raul Lambino, one of Arroyo’s lawyers, said the mood turned jubilant in Arroyo’s hospital room when word leaked that the country’s highest court was set to strike down the only criminal case keeping her detained. Arroyo was smiling in the picture he took with her.

Another Arroyo lawyer, Ferdinand Topacio, said the Supreme Court “has once again proven itself to be the final bastion of justice and the rule of law.”

The ruling, he said, validated the position of the Arroyo camp that the charges against her were “nothing more than disingenuous attempts at political persecution.”

“We are reminding the Supreme Court that the Arroyo government left behind 1,206 victims of political killings and 206 victims of enforced disappearances among activists, peasants, and human-rights workers,” said Cristina Palabay, secretary general of the human-rights group Karapatan. She said the 2009 massacre of 58 people, including 32 journalists, in the world’s worst single killing of media workers, also happened during Arroyo’s term.

Karapatan said “while plunderers and murderers like Arroyo are set free from prison, more than 500 political prisoners remain in jail, many of them arrested during the Arroyo regime.”

The 69-year-old Arroyo was whisked out of a military veterans’ hospital in suburban Quezon city and driven to her home in the upscale La Vista residential enclave in the Manila metropolis, her lawyer, Lawrence Arroyo, said.

She did not appear before throngs of journalists who waited for her release. Back at home, Arroyo had dinner with some of her children and grandchildren and expressed eagerness to return to the House of Representatives, to which she was re-elected in May despite her detention. She attended President Rodrigo Duterte’s state of the nation address, lawyer Ferdinand Topacio, an Arroyo supporter, said.

AP writer Jim Gomez contributed to this report.



INAPPROPRIATE PLAYPLACE. People are seen playing Pokémon Go near the Atomic Bomb Dome at Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park in Hiroshima, Japan. Players of the game are descending on the atomic bomb memorial park in Hiroshima — and officials of the western Japanese city are displeased. They have asked game developer Niantic Inc. to remove the “Pokéstops” and other virtual sites that show up in the park for those playing the augmented-reality game. The city wants them deleted by August 6, the anniversary of the 1945 bombing and the date of an annual ceremony to remember the victims. (Kyodo News via AP)

Hiroshima unhappy atomic-bomb park is Pokémon Go site

TOKYO (AP) — Pokémon Go players are descending on an atomic bomb memorial park in Hiroshima — and officials of the western Japanese city are displeased.

They have asked game developer Niantic Inc. to remove the “Pokéstops” and other virtual sites that show up in the park for those playing the augmented-reality game. The city wants them deleted by August 6, the anniversary of the 1945 bombing and the date of an annual ceremony to remember the victims.

Niantic declined to comment, saying it would not make public any discussions with a third party.

The expansive Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park is meant as a solemn memorial to the victims. It has become a draw for players since the Japan release of the addictive smartphone game.

Elsewhere, the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., and nearby Arlington National Cemetery, have made similar requests to Niantic.

It is unclear if and how the game developer will respond. Niantic offers a form to request exclusions, but it’s neither automatic nor guaranteed.

The location-aware app gives digital rewards for visiting real places that have been designated as “Pokéstops” and “Gyms” in the game.

Japan’s nine safety tips for Pokémon Go

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cartoon of two pistol-wielding men in cowboy gear to emphasize the point.

Beware of people who say they want to meet

The government warns against meeting strangers. Bring an adult if players

absolutely have to meet in person and avoid playing the game in a place where no one is around.

Do not use smartphones while walking

There are many accidents related to texting while walking. The game has a feature that a phone vibrates when a character appears near players. If it does, stop and check out the surroundings before looking at a smartphone.

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