# Roque arrest serves ends of justice

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Former Duterte spokesperson Harry Roque is playing catch me if you can. But as a lawyer, he should know that flight often indicates guilt. Sought by the House to shed light on his role in a controversial Philippine offshore gaming operators (Pogos) hub, Roque briefly went into hiding before slipping out of the country last month.

His last known location was the Middle East, which was inadvertently made public when he filed his counter-affidavit to the qualified human trafficking case against him and more than 50 others including his client, Cassandra Li Ong.

In a Zoom interview last week, Roque himself told reporters that he had his counter-affidavit notarized in the Philippine embassy in Abu Dhabi, thus raising a lot of questions, among them: why didn’t the Filipino consul who authenticated the affidavit and our ambassador in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) inform the Philippines of Roque’s whereabouts? How did he end up in the capital city of UAE anyway? Did key players in the now illegal Pogo sector facilitate his escape?

## Hefty increase in wealth

Roque fled the country despite an arrest warrant issued by the House of Representatives for his failure to submit documents that would justify the hefty increase in his wealth, which he himself had promised earlier during congressional hearings on Pogos. According to Batangas Rep. Gerville Luistro, Roque’s assets ballooned to P125 million in 2018 from a measly P125,000 in 2016.

Tracing a paper trail that led to Roque’s doorstep, the House quad committee and the Presidential Anti-Organized Crime Commission (PAOCC) had uncovered evidence about his substantive role in a Pogo hub suspected to be behind illegal activities and scams.

A PAOCC raid on Lucky South 99, a Pogo hub in Porac, Pampanga, in June yielded incriminating documents bearing Roque’s signature. Despite his repeated denials of involvement in illegal Pogo operations, Roque had provided legal counsel to Whirlwind Corp., which owns the raided property.

## Biancham Holdings

In late July, Roque admitted to partly owning the house in Tuba, Benguet, where PAOCC and Bureau of Immigration (BI) agents nabbed two Chinese nationals who have links to the Pogo hub associated with former Bamban, Tarlac, mayor Alice Guo. Suspected of faking Filipino citizenship, Guo is facing complaints for graft, qualified human trafficking, money laundering, tax evasion, and election offenses.

The raided house belongs to PH2 Corp., a company owned primarily by Biancham Holdings and Trading Inc. Is it pure coincidence that Roque and his wife, Mylah, were listed as shareholders of Biancham, a portmanteau of their children’s names? Sen. Risa Hontiveros noted as well that model and pageant winner Alberto Rodulfo dela Serna, who was Roque’s former executive assistant, is also listed as a shareholder.

There’s no denying that Roque’s escape indicates that the manhunt operations launched by authorities in early September had failed miserably. Despite the House’s warrant of arrest, he had managed to bolt the country, making a mockery of congressional summons and raising serious doubts about the BI’s ability to safeguard the country’s ports and airports from the entry and exit of dubious personalities. We might not know how Roque and his wife managed to leave local shores, but without a pending case in court that could warrant the issuance of a hold departure order, suspicions are rife that they left the country through official channels.

## Political connections

Moreover, the apparent hesitation by some agencies to track Roque only shows that political connections can upend the nation’s search for truth and justice.

Sen. Sherwin Gatchalian noted that because of the House’s arrest warrant and contempt order, Roque should have been on the BI’s lookout bulletin. He added: “I hope this is not an ‘Alice Guo part two’ because you cannot take a boat all the way to the Middle East. It’s impossible.”

Hontiveros showed the same incredulity towards the BI’s wanton negligence. “Dubai in the UAE is a Pogo hub, so it’s possible that Pogo actors helped him escape,” she said, adding that the Bureau has yet to explain how Guo had escaped to Indonesia undetected in July, before she was arrested on Sept. 3.

Rubbing salt on the country’s wound caused by Roque’s escape is his privileged status as spokesperson of former president Rodrigo Duterte. Is this why the nation’s top police and Interior officials haven’t publicly protested his escape, much less declare that they’d personally fetch him like they did Guo in Jakarta, Indonesia?

Roque’s continued absence jeopardizes the nation’s call for accountability from those who had conspired with mostly Chinese nationals to enable Pogos to thrive, even through criminal means. In the interest of justice, it is necessary for government agencies to produce Roque so that the investigation into Pogos and their local protectors can continue unabated—even beyond the year-end deadline set by President Marcos to end all Pogo operations.