# No dodging accountability

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It appears that while most Filipinos were busy with recent holiday festivities, an operative of the Philippine offshore gaming operators (Pogos) had tried to pull a fast one on the country’s bendable judicial system.

“I have received reports that there are officials in the Bureau of Immigration (BI) who attempted to push for the release on bail of Tony Yang,” Sen. Risa Hontiveros said Monday, referring to the older brother of Michael Yang, the purported economic adviser of former president Rodrigo Duterte.

In a statement, the BI confirmed that a petition had been filed on Dec. 16 to grant bail to the detained businessman based on a medical certification from the House of Representatives, but that its approval was not guaranteed.

The fact that a petition was even filed speaks volumes about how lightly Yang and his lawyer consider his transgressions, and how low their regard must be for some government agencies and their officials who could be “persuaded” to look the other way.

## Abuse of PH laws

The bail attempt is the latest indication of how personalities linked to illegal Pogo hubs notorious for hosting criminal activities like cyber scams, money laundering, and human trafficking have tried to escape accountability under Philippine laws.

Yang was arrested on Sept. 19 by agents from BI and the Presidential Anti-Organized Crime Commission (PAOCC) at a Manila airport, with his arrest said to be “critical” to Congress’ investigation on the criminal networks behind Pogos. In a Senate hearing, Yang admitted to being Yang Jian Xin, a Chinese national who managed to secure fraudulent government documents, including a Philippine birth certificate, to be able to do business as a Filipino citizen.

Yang, who has a warrant of arrest from China, is facing complaints from the National Bureau of Investigation Northern Mindanao for falsifying public documents, committing perjury, and violating the anti-alias law.

“We have seen plenty of evidence proving his abuse of Philippine policies, and yet, he will be released? We have seen how easy it was for Guo Hua Ping to slip out,” Hontiveros said, referring to former Bamban, Tarlac mayor Alice Guo.

## Attempts to leave PH

In August, it was reported that Guo had fled to Malaysia and Singapore en route to Indonesia in mid-July after her ties to illegal Pogos and fake Filipino citizenship were exposed. With information from Indonesian authorities, Guo was arrested and deported back to the Philippines in September.

Yang could have been similarly attempting to leave the Philippines when he was caught, the PAOCC said, because he was carrying P1.4 million cash and other currencies, a Philippine passport, and a gun permit issued to a certain Antonio Maestrado Lim, his supposed Filipino alias.

“Should we still believe that Yang would adhere to the law?” asked Hontiveros, who co-chairs the upper chamber’s investigation into Pogos. He can get medical attention if he needs it, “but he should remain under government custody,” she added.

Yang has previously denied his involvement in the Pogo service provider OroOne Corp. and said the company was only leasing his property and sought his help to get the needed business permits. Hontiveros easily demolished the claim by presenting documents showing Yang as president and majority shareholder of the company.

## Trial balloon

Yang’s attempts to dodge accountability for his involvement in illegal Pogo activities should prompt Justice Secretary Jesus Remulla to file criminal charges against him posthaste, as he had said earlier. A hold departure order should also be issued against this possible flight risk.

Given its record of accommodating foreign nationals who bend the rules for “certain considerations” as in the case of the “pastillas scam” where working visas were issued to Chinese nationals in exchange for cash, the BI itself should strictly monitor its personnel who could collude with Yang’s representatives to allow him to slip out of the country.

For its part, the Anti-Money Laundering Council should heed Hontiveros’ call and speed up its investigation of Yang’s alleged money laundering activities so that the proper charges can be filed.

“He cannot escape accountability,” Hontiveros said, referring to the bail attempt as a possible “trial balloon” among some officials on how far they can go tolerating, even enabling, such legal maneuverings meant to evade the law before Filipinos raise an outcry.

Prosecuting Yang should be the first order of business among law enforcement and judicial agencies at the start of the year. With money from criminal elements freely flowing into campaign coffers to secure their protectors’ election or reelection in May, this is no time for complacency or dillydallying. The message should be clear and uncompromising, that the government is serious about going after those who would use lapses in law enforcement with impunity for personal gain.