# From watchdog to undertaker

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The dismissal of yet another civil forfeiture case involving assets allegedly pillaged during the dictatorship—the latest in a growing tally since President Marcos took power in 2022—adds another black mark to the tarnished legacy of the Presidential Commission on Good Government (PCGG).

Once heralded as a public watchdog entrusted with the noble mission to recover ill-gotten wealth from the martial law years, it has slowly morphed into an undertaker whose sole task is presiding over the slow funeral of its own cases.

In its Feb. 18, 2025 resolution, the Sandiganbayan’s Second Division dismissed Civil Case No. 0032, which sought the reconveyance and restitution of 16 luxury vehicles acquired by government photographer Fernando Timbol through his close ties with the Marcoses. The case, filed in 1987, remained unresolved for decades until the court threw it out, citing the government’s failure to move for a default order when the late strongman Ferdinand Marcos Sr.’s widow Imelda, the only surviving defendant, failed to respond to a court order issued in 1992.

The case was deemed “neglected, forgotten and left pending” until its quiet demise last month.

## Luxury vehicles recovered

But in a statement dated Feb. 25, coinciding with the 39th anniversary of the Edsa People Power Revolution that toppled Marcos Sr.’s regime, the PCGG dismissed suggestions it was remiss in pursuing the forfeiture case, arguing it had succeeded in recovering the ill-gotten vehicles. “However, the proceedings remained in the docket until the court scheduled a case conference on Jan. 21, 2025, to put the case to a close,” it said.

The PCGG said it posed no objection to the termination of the civil case, as it had already satisfied the Supreme Court’s writ of execution by turning over the forfeited properties: “In light of PCGG’s manifestation, the Sandiganbayan dismissed the case against the Marcos spouses.”

But the commission conveniently ignores the fact that the case was never just about recovery, it was also about seeking restitution and damages for the “unlawful acquisition” of the properties in question.

Also, its argument collapses under the weight of its own recent shortcomings, considering that this court defeat is not an isolated incident. On the contrary, it is part of what the Campaign Against the Return of the Marcoses and Martial Law (Carmma) described as a “pattern of the Philippine justice system’s exoneration” of the accused in the ill-gotten wealth cases

## Ninth dismissed case since 2022

By Carmma’s count, Civil Case No. 0032 was the ninth known case against the Marcoses to be dismissed by either the Sandiganbayan or the Supreme Court since Marcos Sr. ’s heir and namesake assumed the presidency on June 30, 2022.

In December 2024, the same Sandiganbayan division issued separate resolutions dismissing eight other ill-gotten wealth cases that were filed against Marcos Sr., Imelda, and the late tycoon and Marcos crony Eduardo Cojuangco Jr.

In October 2024, the Sandiganbayan dismissed a P276-million civil case against the estate of Marcos Sr. and his widow. In February 2024, the anti-graft court dismissed charges against three alleged dummies of Marcos Sr., involving the accumulation of P2.4 billion worth of properties believed to be funded by ill-gotten wealth.

In June 2023, the Sandiganbayan dismissed a civil case against the heirs of Marcos Sr. because several pieces of evidence presented by the PCGG were deemed inadmissible as evidence. In February 2023, the Sandiganbayan’s Fifth Division junked another one of the ill-gotten wealth cases involving the Busuanga Properties in Palawan province.

## First agency created by Cory

By no stretch of the imagination could this performance be called satisfactory. Indeed, it is an appalling track record for the first agency ever created by the late President Corazon Aquino, under Executive Order No. 1, on Feb. 28, 1986, after the bloodless Edsa uprising that toppled the first Marcos administration.

As of 2023, the PCGG claims to have recovered a total of P280 billion in ill-gotten wealth from the Marcoses and their cronies, including Swiss bank deposits, shares of stock, real estate properties, and paintings and jewelry.

But the PCGG’s repeated failures in court are putting a stain on such a legacy that spans multiple decades and generations. There are broader implications, as well: Every dismissed case weakens the public’s fragile trust in the justice system and conveys the message that wealth and power can buy impunity.

For this reason, the courts must exercise greater diligence in ensuring that the cases are resolved based on merit rather than technicality, without trying to curry favor with the incumbent administration. For its part, the PCGG must reclaim its mandate and inject new energy into its pursuit of what remains of its cases.

But if it continues to lose its court battles, then perhaps it is time to ask whether this agency has well and truly outlived its purpose.