# Probe VP funds’ dubious recipients | Inquirer Opinion

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While the country appears focused on former president Rodrigo Duterte’s arrest and turnover to the International Criminal Court (ICC), another issue of accountability—this time over the questionable use of hundreds of millions in public funds—deserves as much discussion and state action beyond the amusing headlines of recent days.

Levity aside, government should look into the list of recipients of Vice President Sara Duterte’s intelligence and confidential funds (ICF) that makes a mockery of accepted procedures in accounting for the use of taxpayer money. The VP’s ICF was the subject of repeated House hearings last year that the official had snubbed. The funds’ confidential nature precludes disclosure on their use, Duterte had insisted when asked how she had gone through P125 million in just 11 days.

A House probe found that the Office of the Vice President (OVP) and the Education department (DepEd), which Duterte used to head, had submitted about 4,500 acknowledgment receipts to the Commission on Audit (COA) to explain how the P612.5 million in ICF for the two offices had been used.

## Suspicious silence

From Mary Grace Piattos to Jay Kamote, Erwin Ewan, and Joug De Asim, the names on the ICF recipient list seem to be based on a drunken dare among office personnel on how far they could get away with gaming COA rules.

The names, according to House Deputy Majority Leader Paolo Ortega V, have no records at the Philippine Statistics Authority and were likely fabricated. The Vice President further muddled their legitimacy by saying that she’s not sure that the list of improbable names was the same list that her staff had submitted to COA.

Such vague answer and her staff’s suspicious silence on the issue only firm up speculations of plunder, one of the grounds cited in the House’s impeachment of the Vice President on Feb. 5.

While the Philippine Constitution provides that “trial by the Senate shall forthwith proceed” once a verified complaint of impeachment is filed, Senate President Francis Escudero chose to postpone the trial to July 30, after the President’s State of the Nation Address. There’s simply no time as the Senate is on recess and won’t be holding any sessions, he said, though this was conveniently set aside when the Senate held a hearing last week on the elder Duterte’s arrest.

## Incriminating testimony

Citing the same reason, Escudero rejected the House’s recent request for the Senate to issue a writ of summons to the VP and direct her to answer the impeachment complaint. “It cannot legally be done because the Senate is not in session,” he said. The House’s prosecutors should be more prudent and adhere to the law, he chided.

With the Senate leadership appearing to abdicate its role in exacting accountability over the flagrant misuse of public funds, should taxpayers wait four more months for some satisfactory response to the issue? For sure, no categorical answer is forthcoming from the VP, given her prevarication and repeated excuse of helping her father prepare for his ICC trial in The Hague for crimes against humanity.

But why can’t the Justice department and the Ombudsman, which seems to balk at probing the corruption allegations against the VP, take a more active role on this issue? The documentary evidence from the COA and the incriminating testimony of personnel from the OVP and the DepEd should provide fertile ground for seeding a plunder investigation. Just as damning are the statements of witnesses summoned at the House hearing, who spoke of bribery and the firing of personnel when they insisted on following established rules on bidding for government contracts.

## 125 million reasons

Instead of just waiting out the Senate’s timeline, the House can meanwhile ask for the identity of the signatories and those who prepared the official list of recipients of the OVP’s confidential funds. With the VP waffling on the authenticity of the list, would it be rocket science to haul to House hearings the staff who had prepared the list and ask them to provide documents on the alleged recipients to prove them qualified—and real?

For sure, most legislators are distracted by the Duterte arrest and its impact on the looming May elections where their posts may be at stake. But it is precisely to educate voters on the perils of choosing candidates based merely on name recall and political connections that legitimate issues reflecting the aspirants’ character, values, and priorities should be publicly dissected. How transparent are they in accounting for funds entrusted them for public use? Are candidates open to disclosing their statement of assets and liabilities to preclude sudden wealth from shady sources?

The actual electoral exercise might take but a few minutes inside the polling booth, but as the laughable list of spurious names indicates, there are 125 million reasons for voters to pause and scrutinize candidates for their vaunted commitment to the country’s future.