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Philippines president, embattled chief justice avoid church Bible rally

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MANILA, Philippines -- The largest and most influential

homegrown religious sect in the Philippines staged a grand Bible rally Tuesday without President Benigno Aquino III and Chief Justice Renato Corona.

The two said they stayed away to avoid giving the event political color. Aquino's administration supports the trial of Corona, who is accused of betrayal of public trust, misdeclaring his assets and giving special treatment and consideration to ex-president Gloria Arroyo and her appointees.

Approximately 600,000 officials and members of Iglesia ni Cristo (Church of Christ) gathered at Manila's Quirino Grandstand and listened to talks on teachings of God in the Bible.

The rally could not escape speculation about political implications. When asked at a press conference at University of Santo Tomas, Aquino said his official invitation said the evangelical mission was purely a religious activity in line with the group's grand centennial celebration in 2014.

Despite Iglesia ni Cristo's rumored sympathy with Corona, whose lead defense counsel is a church member, Aquino expressed gratitude for the church's support for his presidential candidacy in 2010 and his senatorial bid in 2007.

Since Felix Manalo founded Iglesia ni Cristo in 1914, its membership has reportedly grown to at least 3 million people in 93 countries. Members are required to vote as a bloc for candidates endorsed by church leaders.

The rally turnout shows Aquino the group's force as impeachment prosecutors wrap up the presentation of their case against Corona. Five of the eight charges filed against the chief justice were dropped Tuesday.

A Philippine National Police spokesman said about 7,000 people turned up to a simultaneous rally in the central Philippines' Cebu City and about 400,000 at a rally in Tarlac City, the Aquino family's stronghold.

Politicians and incumbent and former public officials and their families attended the gatherings, including Supreme Court Spokesman Jose Midas Marquez.

Marquez said Corona would not attend the prayer and evangelical mission to avoid accusations he is using it for political purposes.

Church spokesman Bienvenido Santiago said, "This religious activity is one of the means by which the church propagates the teachings of God in the Bible that members of the Iglesia ni Cristo believe to be essential for man's salvation."

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