

Commentary

# Philippines: The return of the predatory regime

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In a recent article in "Foreign Affairs," Larry Diamond argues that the world has now fallen into a democratic recession and that predatory states are on the rise, posing a threat to both established and new democracies. Although Diamond does not specifically mention the Philippines as a predatory state, most if not all of the features he describes would seem to apply to present-day Philippines. The country suffers from grave social disparities and the increasingly opportunistic behavior of its political-economic elite. No less than Supreme Court Chief Justice Reynato Puno declares that the greed of a few families has made it difficult for most Filipinos to enjoy the good life. "These families," he says, "have perpetuated their stranglehold on our country's wealth, dynasty after dynasty. There is no end to their greed, no border to their covetousness."

Instead of applying the term predatory state to the Philippines, I use predatory regime. Predatory state connotes an entity that is enduring and resistant to change. Under such a concept, governments or regimes may come and go, but the predatory state remains. In actuality, shifts to or away from predatory politics can very well take the form of change in regime, whether abrupt or incremental. Especially during times of such shifts, the regime rather than the state provides the better level of analysis.

Ferdinand Marcos' authoritarian rule of more than 13 years, plus possibly part of his pre-authoritarian rule, can be more accurately described as a predatory regime rather than a predatory state. It was markedly different from the clientelist regimes of his predecessors. Marcos' "politics of plunder" completely overwhelmed the old-style patronage politics of previous regimes.

The predatory regime has made a comeback in present-day Philippines. Over the past decade, and especially over the past few years, the levels of political corruption, fraud and violence have reached such alarming levels that many Filipinos have grown despondent, even cynical, about their country's political system.

Although President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo has staved off impeachment or ouster, she has not been able to convince people of her probity nor that of her administration. According to a Pulse Asia survey conducted late last year, Filipinos believe that Arroyo has been "the most corrupt" among five Filipino presidents in the past 21 years, surpassing even Marcos and Joseph Estrada.

The corruption that has engulfed the Philippines appears to have reached the level of the corruption to be found in a predatory state as denoted by Diamond: "Corruption is the core phenomenon of the predatory state."

The Philippines' current predatory regime, covering both the Estrada and Arroyo governments, is not authoritarian as the Marcos regime was, but it clearly has growing authoritarian tendencies or features.

Manipulated by the rapacious elite, the predatory regime has, in fact, developed institutions of its own or warped democratic institutions into predatory ones. The patrimonialistic political parties of the elite, essentially no different from the Kilusang Bagong Lipunan of the Marcos authoritarian era, are a key institution of the current predatory regime. The clientelist institutions of “padrino” and “kumpare-kumare” have been transformed into the outright predatory institutions of godfather-boss and crony networks. Other predatory institutions include the pork barrel, which has been a notorious source of kickbacks for senators and congresspersons; the 20 percent “commission” on government deals, which is now regarded as “normal”; vote-buying, which Filipinos now seem to expect to happen during elections; and, in certain areas of Muslim Mindanao, the falsification of election returns, a practice dating back to the Marcos era.

Given the seemingly unceasing scams and cover-ups under the current predatory dispensation, the Philippines is assured of continuing political instability in the coming years. Another “people power” uprising, a military mutiny (or coup) or a combination of the two could still topple Arroyo. In another crisis, she could resort to another state of emergency, possibly a much longer one, to martial law or even to a Fujimori-style “autogolpe” (self-coup). And she could then attempt to extend her stay in power. With the 2010 presidential elections fast approaching, however, it is becoming more likely that Arroyo will finish out her term as the country’s “constitutionally elected” president. At this late stage, it does not look as if Arroyo will still be able—or care—to engineer a constitutional change that would allow her to hold on to power beyond 2010. If Arroyo does go in 2010, she will not do so quietly. She would have to marshal all possible resources and means to insure that her successor is a close ally, and not one who could put her behind bars, as she did to her predecessor at least for a couple of years.

The growing authoritarian features of the Arroyo administration will not necessarily culminate in an authoritarian predatory regime. In the coming years, it is likely that one of two possibilities will take place: (1) that the current predatory regime continues even beyond Arroyo’s term; or (2) that the country reverts to a clientelist regime that is less corrupt and with less authoritarian features. The 2010 elections could very well produce another Arroyo-type president or another Ramos-type.

It is unlikely that the Philippines in the near future will significantly turn away from predatory or clientelist politics. Predatory and clientelist elements are much too strong and the forces for democratic reform are much too weak. The patrimonialistic parties of the elite control the upper house of Congress fully and hold an overwhelming majority in the lower house. More importantly, they control 99 percent of the country’s local government units at the municipal, city and provincial levels. Cutting off the head of the monster amounts to nothing much as it merely regenerates another head. Reform-oriented forces have expended so much of their energies and resources on campaigns to oust Arroyo or on winning a few seats in Congress through the party-list or senatorial vote that they have been unable to build a strong political-electoral base from below.

The prospects for democratic consolidation in the Philippines in the coming years appear bleak. It may take at least half a decade for forces of change to turn the tide in democracy’s favor. The challenge ahead of them is not only to strengthen “weak” democratic institutions. Since many of the country’s democratic institutions have already been warped or subverted, the challenge is perhaps much more to dismantle predatory and clientelist institutions and build democratic ones, or to transform the former into the latter.

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