

No political democracy without economic equality

# The unique Philippines

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**The Philippines is technically a democracy but actually an oligarchy, its original landowning elite now supplemented by dynasties from industry and the services sector, and popular celebrities. The Catholic Church and the military also regularly intervene in government.**

The president of the Philippines, Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, decreed a state of emergency on 24 February this year. The official reason was that it had been necessary to counter a possible putsch by “leftist activists and rightwing military opportunists” ; the government claimed that disgruntled officers had hatched a plot, codenamed Oplan Hackle, to be activated during anti-government demonstrations that were planned for the following weekend.

The government issued arrest warrants for six leftwing members of parliament, who promptly took refuge in the Congress building, and published a list of militants that it claimed were involved. These included an exiled member of the Filipino Communist party, José Maria Sison, and the leader of the National Democratic Front, Luis Jalandoni.

A mutiny in the marines was hastily put down. As had happened after the failed mutiny of July 2003, in which 300 soldiers from an elite unit occupied a shopping centre in the financial district of Makati for several hours, the rebels were reprimanded and sent back to barracks. Two high-ranking officers, Brigadier General Danilo Lim of the Scout Rangers (an elite reconnaissance unit) and Colonel Ariel Querubin of the Marine Corps, were arrested and charged with being “habitual offenders”. Both had taken part in a failed coup in 1989.

A week later, on 3 March, Arroyo lifted the state of emergency and declared that she wanted to negotiate with the military. But the arrest warrants remained in place, along with a ban on demonstrations and a threat of press censorship.

These events could be viewed as just another tragicomic event in Filipino politics, but it is worth examining their underlying causes. No nation in Asia has had its hopes dashed so often. The country is proud of its democracy, since the Philippines was the first colony in Asia to declare independence when it broke from Spain in 1898. The ephemeral first republic was soon crushed by the United States, at first violently with guns, and then benevolently with elections. The US held on to its colony until 1935 when the Philippines won its autonomy, followed by independence in 1946.

It had barely recovered from the devastating Japanese occupation during the second world war, the internal revolt of the Huk rebellion [[1](#)], and the death of Ramon Magsaysay, its nationalist president from 1953-57, when it became a pawn in the cold war game played in Asia. A series of incompetent and corrupt presidents received strong US support in exchange for housing the largest American military bases outside the US, until they were shut in 2000.

Filipino politics has several characteristics that transcend both geopolitical influences and the

vicissitudes of human behaviour. They are oligarchic in nature. The Philippines is the only country in southwest Asia with no political structure above the level of the barangay, the pre-colonial village. It is also the country in which the impact of colonialism has been the strongest. The village strongmen, as early anthropologists called them, became caciques under Spanish rule and remained local leaders under the US, as they are today.

Politics in the Philippines is not simply ordered by a primitive localism, for the structures gradually put into place by Spain and the US much influenced their development. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century an indigenous elite had emerged, mostly mestizos - ethnic families with mixed Spanish, Chinese or Malay ancestry. They were usually landowners and had gained economic influence with the development of international trade and of the plantations. When the US sought to transform its only colony into an example of democracy, it co-opted the local elite and made sure that their economic clout was translated into relative political clout.

Filipino clientelism functions in a system that is democratic in theory but elitist in practice, based on local fiefdoms founded during this period [2]. Only 3% of the adult population was eligible to vote in the first legislative elections of 1907 ; only 14% were entitled to vote for the first president of the Commonwealth of the Philippines in 1935. While the landowning oligarchy still plays a disproportionately important role in politics, new dynastic groups have also emerged from industry and the services sector.

Universal suffrage and nationwide elections have led to a clear distinction between locally elected politicians (mayors, members of Congress, governors) and national ones (senators and presidents). Most presidential candidates are from well-established families and/or have a local power base, and use the Senate as a springboard. Since the end of the Marcos dictatorship, and because of the current universal power of media celebrity, voters have turned to movie stars and television presenters : of 24 senators elected in 2001, six were famous actors, television presenters or sports personalities.

The 1987 constitution attempted to end dynastic politics by limiting parliamentary terms of office and introducing a proportion of congressional seats elected from party lists. This led to the arrival of a few token independent leftwing members of parliament, while dynastic politics strengthened. According to a study by the Philippine Centre for Investigative Journalism in 2004, two-thirds of Congress members came from the political dynasties. Their fortunes almost tripled between the 11<sup>th</sup> Congress elected in 1992 and the 12<sup>th</sup> in 2001 [3].

A mutual dependence has been established between national politicians, who rely on local chiefs for finance and votes, and the chiefs themselves, who need the politicians' nation-wide network of contacts and influence with the media to protect their interests.

Another characteristic of Filipino society is the importance of religion, reflected in constant moral references in political speeches and the unique role of the Catholic Church. The Church is ambiguous. The former Primate of the Philippines, Cardinal Jamie Sin, with the Catholic bishops' conference, championed the departure of Marcos in 1986 and of Joseph Estrada in 2001. By helping the National Movement for Free Elections (Namfel) and encouraging the faithful to vote, the Church greatly contributed to the democratic process.

However, this approach has its limitations. The Catholic hierarchy is focused on the rites of democracy - elections - but is not much concerned with their outcome. As Eva-Lotta Hedman has noted [4], the Church should be considered a part of the dominant power structure, like the oligarchic elite. By promoting the importance of the electoral process in a very inegalitarian society, the Catholic hierarchy is involuntarily perpetuating a system in which the privileges of the elite are

entrenched and defended.

Although 80% of Filipinos are Catholic, they do not obey all the precepts of the Church. Divorce is forbidden but extra-marital relations are common : 35% of women use contraceptives and some 400,000-800,000 illegal abortions take place each year [5]. The dominant Catholic Church has competition from a dissident evangelical Protestant group, Iglesia de Christa ; even within Catholic ranks there is a charismatic movement, El Shaddai, with over 10 million members. The theology of prosperity preached by El Shaddai's evangelists is inspired by US televangelists. Among El Shaddai's charismatics is Brother Mike, a former real estate agent. He preaches that poverty is a personal problem that can be solved by a mix of individual effort and divine intervention.

Military intervention is another given of Filipino political life. Although the army has never been in power, it has, like the Church, become a major political force because of its king-making capabilities. It soon became politicised after Marcos declared martial law in 1972. He had ensured the support he needed for his regime by granting privileges to officers and naming family members and acolytes to the military hierarchy. The defection to Corazon Aquino's camp of his then minister of defence, Juan Enrile, as well as of his deputy chief of staff, General Fidel Ramos, hastened the fall of Marcos. Once democracy was re-established in 1986, Aquino and Ramos became dependent on military chiefs, and not only on superior officers.

The Philippine Military Academy is modelled on West Point ; it stresses obedience to civil authority and defence of a democratic society. Underpaid young officers are sent off to Luzon to handle dangerous and demoralising counter-offensives against the Communist guerrillas of the New Army of the People (Nap) or to fight Muslim separatists in Mindanao. They are disgusted by the wealth and privileges of their sedentary superiors in Manila, as well as by the erratic policies of a dubious civilian authority. Under the Marcos regime, dissident officers founded the Reform the Armed Forces Movement led by Colonel (later Senator) Gregorio "Gringo " Honasan. He soon won a Robin Hood reputation ; on 24 February he was at the head of the most wanted list. The Young Officers Union has recently found a similar reforming role.

The Philippines holds a number of unfortunate records. According to the human rights organisation Karapatan, there have been 400 political assassinations since 2001 ; 83 victims were leaders or members of leftwing parties, including the worker's organisation, Bayan Muna ; some 70 were farmers or farmers' leaders in conflict over land and agricultural labour ; 18 were trades unionists and workers ; 26 were unarmed Muslim political prisoners ; 24 were journalists and human rights activists, including lawyers and priests [6].

The Philippines also has the worst record for kidnappings in Asia : 44 cases were reported to the police in 2005, and since Chinese Filipinos do not report kidnappings, there must have been many more. Child trafficking involves 60,000-100,000 victims a year [7]. These are not always ordinary criminal activities ; they include acts by private militias and death squads, often with the approval, if not the direct collusion, of the army and police. The Filipino press and some NGOs courageously denounce crimes and criminals, but few people are arrested and fewer charged.

There is a certain tolerance for violence in political life, which may explain why 20 people were killed campaigning during the 2004 elections. But the worsening criminality of political violence is a cause for concern. Abu Sayyaf, the separatist Muslim organisation in Mindanao, finances itself through kidnappings and violence, while the Nap considers that levying a revolutionary tax is a justified means to an end.

Another vital characteristic of Filipino politics is the emergence of the middle class, whose mobilisation was key to the People's Power Revolutions (see "Four precarious presidencies"). These

wage-earners are independent of clientelism and integral to civil society.

The Philippines is a striking example of the effects of world trade on a national economy. Because there are no domestic opportunities, more and more Filipinos are voting with their feet and leaving the country in search of work. The Philippines has the third-largest emigrant population, at 10 million overseas workers, after Mexico and India.

A study by the Asian Development Bank estimated that in 2003 overseas Filipinos sent \$7.6bn home, which represents 10.5% of GDP and 20% of exports [8]. These remittances by overseas Filipino workers have had positive effects. They enabled the country to pull itself out of the 1997 Asian economic crisis and they account for 45% of foreign exchange reserves. The remitted money has also boosted domestic consumption.

There are drawbacks : the emigration has led to single-parent families, dependent rural communities and a trend for consumption of goods rather than investment in productive activities. There is a shortage of nurses because so many have left for better-paid jobs in the US and Europe, or other parts of Asia such as Japan. The political cost of the exodus is high, since those who leave are generally the most highly skilled and motivated workers, leaving fewer people behind who are capable of changing things. Filipinos working and living in the US helped overthrow Marcos, but the new generation of overseas workers seems uninterested in what happens back home. Expat Filipinos keep their voting rights, but only 368,000 of 1.7 million signed up before the 2004 elections and far fewer voted [9].

There are two serious questions prompted by the Philippines. One is the role of the media and civil society in monitoring social justice. The local press is among the most free and bravest in Asia, but its revelations about the corruption and delinquency of the elite have not led to arrests or criminal investigations, or even to the miscreants being banished from the political scene. The other, more important, question is whether political democracy can be viable without a certain level of economic democracy. In a country where 40-50% live below the poverty line, is it possible for there to be liberty and fraternity without some measure of equality ?

**David Camroux**

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## **Four precarious presidencies**

By the time that the long dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos ended in 1986, corruption, favouritism and the stripping of state assets had reached such proportions (the Marcos family had siphoned off \$5m-10m to foreign bank accounts) that the then president of the United States, Ronald Reagan, finally withdrew his support.

Massive demonstrations against electoral fraud in the 1986 presidential elections forced the departure of Marcos. That fraud had prevented the rightful victory of Corazon Aquino, wife of the opposition leader Senator Benigno Aquino, assassinated in 1983. People Power Revolution 1 (also called EDSA 1, after the main highway that surrounds Metro Manila, where thousands demonstrated) became a powerful symbol of political change in Asia. Berobered bishops, uniformed officers, rock and film stars led the revolution, supported by Manila's poor - the masa - and middle-class urbanites.

Cory Aquino's presidency (1986-92) proved disappointing, despite such initial massive popular support. A new constitution was drawn up to prevent a repeat of the excesses of the Marcos regime, but other hopes of reform, especially in the vital agrarian sector, evaporated. Aquino, who owed her legitimacy to the Catholic Church, was under constant threat of a military coup by officers politicised by the Marcos era. She clung to a single objective : consolidating electoral democracy.

Her presidency did open the way for a peaceful transfer of power to her successor, Fidel Ramos. He made some domestic reforms and opened up the economy, which began to catch up with its neighbours. He even passed a few timid agricultural reforms, signed a peace agreement with Muslim separatists in Mindanao and set up a family planning programme in an effort to contain the population explosion. But under the new constitution he was unable to run for a second term and was succeeded by his vice-president, Joseph "Erap" Estrada.

Erap was a former senator and a film actor known for his good-cop roles. He called himself a friend of the poor during his campaign and won 40% of the vote, despite opposition from the business community and the Church. He was a wellknown drinker who had built luxury villas for his mistresses : this gave the press plenty of derogatory material, yet endeared him to voters.

Nevertheless, his corrupt practices and abuses of power - he made huge sums from illegal gambling and he tended to govern at midnight cabinet meetings with drinking buddies - plus the favours he had granted to Marcos-era friends, finally led to an attempt to impeach him.

When his supporters blocked the motion in the Senate, an alliance between the Church and business triggered a repeat of the middle-class protest movement : People Power or Edsa 2. The procedures used to dislodge Estrada were constitutionally dubious, but once the armed forces and the police withdrew their support, the Supreme Court nominated the vice-president, Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, to replace him.

She was a former senator and daughter of a former president, with a doctorate in economics awarded in the US ; like Cory Aquino, she was a devout Catholic. She seemed to offer a return to normality.

After the Estrada episode, politics returned to the protection of vested interests. Estrada had retained support in the slums as well as in his native province ; his followers felt cheated and, a few months after Edsa 2, attempted to march on the presidential palace ; the demonstration, Edsa 3, was put down with violence. Simmering discontent was exploited, when both Estrada's wife, Luisa, and his son, Jose, also a former film actor, were elected to the Senate.

Arroyo began as the non-elected president in an unstable environment. She was dependent on the same forces as Aquino, and to a greater degree. She scrapped the family planning programme to placate the Catholic Church, and bought peace from top army officers by granting promotions and lucrative positions in government or the private sector.

Having received "divine instructions", and despite a previous promise, she sought a new six-year mandate and was re-elected. Her adversary, Fernando Poe Jr, immediately challenged the result, declaring that her 3% winning margin was a consequence of electoral fraud ; he tried unsuccessfully to have her dismissed. Arroyo was not accused of corruption but her businessman husband fled the country to avoid legal proceedings. Some of her former supporters called for her dismissal after the revelation of a conversation with the head of the electoral commission on the evening of the elections.

Arroyo's precarious position forced her to declare a state of emergency and propose a change to the

constitution that would transform the present bicameral legislature into a parliamentary form of government with a single chamber. This project, known as “chacha”, for charter change, has been violently criticised because it provisionally allows the incumbent politicians’ terms of office to be extended by three years [10]. Some think the change would reinforce local fiefdoms. Others fear their privileges are under threat, or regard this as a means for Arroyo to keep her job and get round the single- mandate limitation on the presidency.

Most people doubt it will do anything to address the deeper causes of political instability : authoritarianism and the lack of structured, independent political parties, organised around a coherent political platform.

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\* From Le Monde diplomatique, English edition, July 2006.

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## **Footnotes**

[1] The Huk rebellion (1946-1954) started against the Japanese occupation, and then focused on landlords.

[2] John Sidel, *Capital, Coercion and Crime : Bossism in the Philippines*, Stanford University Press, 1999.

[3] Sheila Coronel, *The Rulemakers : How the Wealthy and Well-Born Dominate Congress*, Philippine Centre for Investigative Journalism, Querzon City, 2004.

[4] Eva-Lotta Hedman, *In the Name of Civil Society : From Free Election Movements to People Power in the Philippines*, University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, 2006.

[5] See Carlos Conde, “Philippines abortion crisis”, *International Herald Tribune*, Paris, 16 May 2005.

[6] James Petras and Robin Eastman-Abaya, “Philippines : the Killing Fields of Asia”, *Counterpunch*, Petrolia, California, 17 March 2006.

[7] Carlos Conde, “Shipment of children”, *International Herald Tribune*, Paris, 9-10 April 2005.

[8] Asian Development Bank, *Enhancing the Efficiency of Overseas Workers’ Remittances*, Manila, 2003. The percentage would be 30% if official transfers were included.

[9] *Financial Times*, London, 8-9 May 2004.

[10] Asia Times Online, Hong Kong, 11 April 2006.