

Ousting Arroyo

Chronicle of the July and February Days in Manila

Saturday 29 April 2006, by [MELENCIO Sonny](#) (Date first published: 28 March 2006).

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IN THE LAST eight months, Philippine President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo has so far survived two attempts to oust her from office. The first attempt constituted the so-called 'opposition salvo' in July 2005. It was followed by the aborted 'military uprising' in February.

The first attempt was staged by bourgeois opposition groups composed of rival electoral parties opposed to Arroyo, the top officials and teams who left Arroyo's executive cabinet, the Makati Business Club (a prominent capitalist group), and former president Corazon Aquino. The second attempt was staged by the rebel groups within the Armed Forces of the Philippines, composed mainly of junior officers and soldiers of the elite army force.

Both attempts were participated in by the so-called civil society groups, mainly the organized forces belonging to various militant formations in the country. Chief among these are the forces that grouped together around Laban ng Masa, a newly-formed coalition of the Left calling for the establishment of a transitional revolutionary government as the alternative to the Arroyo regime. The transitional government (or the TRG as it is popularly called) is a coalition government that will bring together in a transition council all the representatives of the major forces that would be responsible for Arroyo's ouster. The TRG is also a reforming government that will carry out in its 1,000 days of rule a program of economic relief and political reforms aimed at reversing the tide of neoliberal economic onslaught and dismantling the reign of elite politics in the country.

The political crisis wracking the Arroyo presidency blew up in June last year when fresh evidence of cheating in the 2004 presidential elections was released to the media by the elite opposition parties. It was known as the "Garcia tape", a secret recording of various conversations between President Arroyo and election official Virgilio Garcillano during the height of the elections. It was a damning evidence of how Arroyo herself had ordered Garcillano to cheat in her favor.

But the electoral cheating was not the only issue that prompted street protests. The people protested on a number of issues, including the government's neoliberal economic policies that brought increased poverty and misery among the poor. If for the elite opposition the main focus of the protests was the cheating in the elections, for the popular sectors it was the failure of the government to provide for the needs of the poor.

Ranged against Arroyo today are opposition groups belonging to the elite and the Left. Arroyo has been very much isolated; recent surveys showed that 65 percent of the population wants Arroyo out of the Palace, either by resigning or by being forced out of office. The elite opposition against Arroyo is headed by such groups as the United Opposition or UNO, a grouping of mostly traditional politicians which include former president Joseph Estrada and his forces, local government leaders, and former cabinet secretaries. Then there are the former cabinet members who left the Arroyo administration on July 8, the groups of presidential candidates who were cheated during the elections, the rival political parties such as the Liberal Party, and others. The Left, on the other hand, are represented by two main groups composed of the Bayan forces (mainly the organizations associated with the Maoist Communist Party of the Philippines) and the Laban ng Masa. These forces have joined together in several rallies and activities already, although they are very much independent from each other.

A part of the elite opposition has been calling for a regime change through constitutional means, such as an impeachment by Congress or a snap presidential election. An impeachment case against Arroyo, however, was thrown out of Congress in September. There are reports that the opposition representatives may try to file a new impeachment case this year. A snap election seems to be difficult, as it involves the resignation of both Arroyo and Vice President Noli de Castro. The failure of constitutional means to resolve the presidential crisis led to the elite opposition calling for extra-constitutional methods, such as another people's power uprising and a coup d'etat staged by the military with civilian support and aimed at installing a transitional regime. The Left sees a window of opportunity on the current political crisis. Laban ng Masa takes the call further - it is campaigning for a TRG premised on the establishment of a coalition government with substantial Left participation and based on a platform of people's demands that will have to be implemented during its term. The establishment of a TRG constitutes a tactical period, where the Left will have enough space to politically maneuver, strengthen its ranks, and mobilize the people towards new upsurges.

Despite the failure of the July and the February attempts to bring down Arroyo, the tempo of the people's mobilization has continuously grown both in terms of quantity and quality since July - i.e., in the number of its participants, the frequency of the mass actions, and in the heightened mood of the masses in the streets and in the communities. As active participant in the street actions, I myself have seen how our mobilization grew from a few thousands in May to tens of thousands in February. Street actions have a regularity that used to be once a month; it graduated to twice, thrice a month, and into a weekly run in December. In February, it was almost daily. The mobilization in the streets has largely been called by the organized forces, but the forces joining them come from the base areas in several factories and communities in Metro Manila. We found out how it is becoming easier now to organize quick mobilization in the base area compared to the previous time.

To show the readers a glimpse of the recent events in Manila, following is a first-hand account of the July and February days, two successive periods where the opposition groups tried to oust President Arroyo.

The July 8 Opposition Salvo

The first salvo was launched on Friday morning, July 8, by ten members of the presidential cabinet and an economic team who declared in a hastily organized media conference that they were resigning from office and they were daring President Arroyo to do the same. This group was tagged by media as the Hyatt 10 in reference to the hotel where they held the conference. The next round of fire was featured in a breaking news report on TV - Senate President Franklin Drilon reading a statement of the Liberal Party, his party, calling on the president to resign. This was followed by

former president Cory Aquino urging Arroyo to “make the supreme sacrifice” if she wanted to “heal” the country. Soon after, the Makati Business Club — a topnotch business group based in the country’s financial district — reiterated the same call on a separate media conference. The firing salvo came one after another, and it was believed that the day would not be over without the president being forced to resign.

That afternoon, a few thousand Laban ng Masa activists assembled in front of Channel 7 TV station and held an impromptu program. The leaders lauded the opposition’s move but cautioned the crowd that the unfolding event should not end up as “another Edsa” where a new crop of traditional politicians (trapos in popular language) would simply take over from the old ones. They instead called for the establishment of a transitional revolutionary government. Meanwhile, tens of thousands of people had started to gather at Ayala, the country’s Wall Street district, to cheer the awaited downfall of Arroyo. The Ayala crowd was a mishmash of groups mainly belonging to the elite-led UNO and the Bayan group.

The Laban ng Masa activists decided to link up with the Ayala gathering and started to march along Edsa avenue, shouting “People’s Power Now!” At around six in the evening, there were radio reports that President Arroyo was at Sulo Hotel conferring with former president Fidel Ramos. A call was made that the march should proceed to the hotel instead. The marchers hesitated for a while, then made a U-turn in an intersection, and proceeded to march to the new site. A few minutes later, radio reports blared that the Arroyo-Ramos meeting had ended.

It turned out that in the meeting, Ramos, who was also a former military general, assured Arroyo of support from himself and other generals. Ramos advised Arroyo to form a junta (calling it a High Commission) to oversee the drafting of a new constitution that would change the bicameral system of government into a parliamentary one. For Ramos, this was the formula to end the political crisis, as it would stall the bid for Arroyo’s resignation, and would unify all the elite opposition under a ‘stable’ parliamentary setup. According to Ramos, the parliamentary system can solve a crisis in governance by the simple method of the parliament declaring ‘loss of confidence’ against the head of state. Moreover, the constitution has to be changed, he said, because it encourages people’s power uprising as the main mode of changing presidents.

But what really saved the day for Arroyo was not Ramos’ convoluted formula about charter change - it was the tacit support or the neutralization of the army generals. This bolstered Arroyo’s confidence that she could weather the storm and stay on longer. Acting firmly, Arroyo called on the police and the military to disperse the crowd that had gathered at Ayala. The elite opposition leading the Ayala gathering hesitated, and after a while called on the crowd to disperse before the police came. The Laban ng Masa contingent decided to call it a day upon hearing of the disbandment of the gathering at Ayala.

The February Days

The second grand attempt to oust Arroyo occurred in February, particularly February 24 and 26. This time around, it was launched by the military forces that had sworn to protect her.

As early as December 2005, there were reports that some military groups were out to get Arroyo. On December 14, Captain Nick Faeldon, one of the more than 90 Magdalo officers and soldiers arrested over charges of coup d’etat in 2003 - in what was popularly known as the Oakwood mutiny - escaped during a court hearing in the city. Faeldon’s escape was followed by the escape of four more Magdalo officers detained at a military camp on the same charges. The Magdalo four who escaped said they wanted not a mere ‘regime change’ but a ‘system change’ or a change in the system of

elite rule in the country. Aside from Faeldon and the Magdalo four, there were two other junior officers who left their camps and circulated a letter to the media saying that they were joining the fugitives.

The military rebels were actually composed of two major groups operating within the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP). One was the Magdalo group whose members are mostly junior officers and soldiers from the marines and air force units. The Magdalo's leaders are mostly in jail, but it was reported that they have thousands of officers still in active service. The other group was the YOUnG or Young Officers Union for the New Generation. Its members are mostly junior officers, with some senior officers commanding battalion and company units. It reportedly includes the Scout Rangers and other special units of the AFP. Both Magdalo and YOUnG are talking with the Left and progressive forces regarding the formation of a transition council and a common program or platform in the post-Arroyo period. In early February, it was reported that the two groups, together with some smaller groupings, had formed a Unified Command to stage the mutiny.

The February events coincided with the 20th anniversary of the first people's power uprising at Edsa avenue. The anniversary days were from February 22-25. On February 22, a 30,000-strong demonstration organized by Laban ng Masa marched to the People's Power Monument to kickoff the anniversary. The monument was situated near the two military camps in Edsa where millions of people rose in support of the military rebels in 1986. This time around, the demonstrators shouted their support to the Magdalo escapees and called for a transitional revolutionary government composed of representatives of workers, farmers and soldiers.

On February 23, upon hearing of the plan by military rebels to stage a mutiny the next day, Laban ng Masa leaders decided to move the planned February 25th rally a day ahead of schedule. On the early morning of Friday, February 24, the radio aired a report that Brig. Gen. Danny Lim, a young general heading the elite force of the Scout Rangers, was put under the custody of AFP chief Generoso Senga. Lim's custody was to prevent him and his forces from joining the opposition rallies that day and from withdrawing support to their Commander-in-Chief Gloria Arroyo. It was also reported that the People's Power Monument had been taken over by the police and the military, and no rally was going to be allowed at that site or anywhere else. A 5,000-strong contingent led by the Bayan forces tried to hold a demonstration at the Edsa Shrine, a kilometer away from the Monument. They were hosed down and violently dispersed by the police.

Earlier that morning, Laban ng Masa forces assembled at Quezon City memorial park and at noontime, they started to march towards the People's Power Monument at Edsa. The march started with a small contingent of 6,000, but grew in number while traversing the 5-kilometer stretch towards the Monument. On the junction leading to Edsa, the radio blared an announcement from President Arroyo that she was imposing a 'state of emergency' to quell the rebellion and 'lawless violence' on the streets. Arroyo issued Proclamation 1017 which called on the entire AFP and the police to use all its forces and resources to squash the rebellion. This announcement merely agitated the marchers who egged on the crowds along the sidewalk to join them, while some continually shouted at the top of their lungs, Laban ng Masa, Patalsikin si Gloria! (People's Fight, Oust Gloria!)

People lined up in the streets and cheered at the marchers. A number of people followed the march and distributed biscuits and bottled water to the marchers. Buses and cars slowed down as the drivers honked their horns to show support. Three truckloads of police, SWAT and special action forces quickly made their way to Edsa and blockaded the road leading to the Monument. By the time the marchers caught sight of the blockade, their number had grown to at least 15,000, not counting the cheering people on the sidewalks. The rally marshals ordered the marchers to stop a few meters away from the police barricade upon hearing a report that platoons of rebel soldiers were preparing to join the marchers. "We'll wait for the rebel soldiers here," was the heavy whisper that circulated

among the crowd. After a while, the marshals announced that we could not wait any longer and had to continue the march to the Monument. The march surged ahead and came face-to-face with the riot police. A fire truck positioned itself in front of the marchers, and without ado, hose down the crowd's frontliners. Pandemonium broke loose as the police charged and swung their sticks against the demonstrators. Those who fell were clubbed repeatedly. A few defended themselves by throwing rocks at the 'rioting' police. In a minute, a couple of marchers lay bloodied on the pavement. Around 60 demonstrators were arrested and brought to police jails.

A call was issued for the demonstrators to regroup in front of Channel 7 station, about five kilometers from the dispersal site. Those who managed to regroup decided to join the rally in Ayala, which was still on at that time. The marchers, now veterans of the street battle in Edsa, trooped to Ayala which by then became the main regroup point for all those dispersed in earlier street actions. It was said that the Ayala rally gathered a peak force of 20,000 in the afternoon. At seven in the evening, a sizeable crowd of 5,000 still remained to keep vigil. People were still coming, with some bringing sandwiches and bottled water for the participants. The whole scene was reminiscent of the Edsa vigils, where a fresh batch of people would trickle in, replacing those who were leaving. At a little past eight, a thousand-strong police force in full anti-riot gear descended on the rally and with clubs swinging, pushed back and dispersed the crowd. The effect was chilling, as it was clear that the police were ready to maim anyone who would refuse to leave. The crowd retreated as the police advanced. In a few minutes, the whole stretch of Ayala avenue appeared deserted, amidst litters of leaflets, flags and banners, broken sandals and empty water bottles.

February 24 was a 'black Friday'. Three separate street mobilizations were all viciously dispersed by the police. A state of national emergency had been imposed. The military rebellion fizzled out, and it was because the rebels had pinned their tactic on convincing the AFP hierarchy to withdraw its support to Arroyo. Instead of getting the hierarchy to their side, the rebel soldiers were the ones neutralized and their leader, General Lim, was promptly put under house arrest. Time and again, the rebel soldiers would be compromised by this tactic of 'winning over the generals' to their side. It should have been clear by now that this tactic is fraught with disaster. The events of February 26 would deliver this lesson once more.

February 26 'Marine Standoff'

On February 26, a quiet Sunday afternoon was broken by a special news report that Marine Col. Ariel Querubin was calling for people's power to defend his unit's resistance to the sacking of a Marine commandant who was a rebel officer. Querubin was himself a rebel military leader who almost lost his life during an attempted coup d'etat against Cory Aquino in 1989. Querubin's men had left their barracks and were seen on TV in full battle gear standing outside the Marine headquarters at Fort Bonifacio. After dark, other Marine units came and positioned themselves in the area. Three tanks rolled in and took positions near the Marine headquarters. TV reporters excitedly talked about an ongoing Marine standoff at Fort Bonifacio.

After a while, mobile text messages were circulating widely about units after units of the AFP preparing to leave their camps to join the resistance. There were reports that some military rebels were ready to takeover the Ayala district. Others said that the situation was very unstable, and that there could be a shooting war between the marines, so it was wise to converge outside the perimeters of the two areas and to wait till the situation cleared up a bit. Laban ng Masa called on its forces to assemble at the University of the Philippines campus, while personalities of the elite opposition trooped to Fort Bonifacio and the Bayan forces went to Ayala.

The Marine standoff at Fort Bonifacio ended as a dud. The various marine units consulted with their generals and decided to end the standoff. They agreed to abide by the official order and went back to their barracks as if nothing had happened. This ended too the vigil led by the bourgeois opposition personalities at Fort Bonifacio. The Bayan forces dispersed its forces at Ayala when they found out that the rebels' plan to takeover the financial district had been abandoned. Meanwhile, only the vigil at the UP campus stayed on until early morning, energized by forces that kept on coming to bolster the ranks of those who stayed on. Randy David, a UP professor and leader of Laban ng Masa, declared the university a sanctuary for those beaten and persecuted by the regime, especially under the recently imposed Proclamation 1017. David said that the campus would host teach-ins and alternative classes to keep the resistance going.

February 26 started with a bang. Activists were expecting that, at last, the AFP would break and a great part would lead the people's forces in finally ousting Arroyo. In the evening, the dismay set in - some were angry that the military rebels did not deliver on what they had promised; most were disheartened that the rebellion had fizzled out once again. The point should be stressed all over again: the rebels should have just declared a break from the military hierarchy, severed their links to the chain of command, and pinned their plans mainly on the actions of the junior officers and soldiers.

Victory Against Proclamation 1017

While the military rebellion fizzled out, the mass movement kept up the struggle against Presidential Proclamation 1017 or PP 1017. The proclamation was Arroyo's panic response to the threat against her regime that is supposedly coming from the "Right to the Left". She referred to the military rebels as forces from the Right. It might have been correct 17 years ago when these rebels staged seven successive coup attempts against the Cory Aquino regime in 1987-89. The rebels were led by forces out to reverse the tide of liberal democracy that Aquino sought to restore after the fall of the Marcos dictatorship. But this could not be said of the military rebels who attempted to oust President Arroyo since 2003. Arroyo is the chief representative of the ultra-Right forces in today's political spectrum, while the forces ranged against her are somewhere from Center to Left of the spectrum. The rebels constitute a new force of young officers and soldiers who have opened their eyes to the bankruptcy of the neoliberal agenda and of elite rule in the country.

PP 1017 was seen by many as a prelude to martial law. Its implementation resurrected a number of martial law impositions, including warrantless arrest, government takeover of media institutions, and the ban on rallies and demonstrations. On the day of the proclamation, the regime issued a list of more than 50 persons to be arrested on charges of rebellion. The list included six representatives from militant party-list groups in Congress. Crispin Beltran, a longtime labor leader and representative of Anakpawis party, was nabbed during the proclamation and is still languishing in jail today. The five representatives eluded arrest by barricading themselves in the halls of Congress where they are still holed up to this time.

Because of escalating protests from the public, human rights groups, and sections of the Church and the business sector, PP 1017 was eventually lifted on March 3, a week after its imposition. An hour before the lifting, around 200 lawyers assembled in front of the headquarters of the lawyers' association in Pasig and lambasted the proclamation. The lawyers marched down the streets and almost clashed with the police when they took over Edsa Shrine to defy a no-rally policy at the site. They held a brief program at the Shrine.

Lawyers are in fact not the first ones who dared defy Arroyo's proclamation. During the first few

days of emergency rule, three universities in Metro Manila broke new grounds when its faculty and students staged a walkout of classes and held day-long campus rallies. Before the lifting of PP 1017, some labor unions were already preparing a protest walkout.

President Arroyo defused the tension by the lifting of PP 1017. However, the restrictions remain in place. Warrantless arrest can still be carried out through other draconian measures such as the anti-rebellion law. A media guidelines have been imposed to gag reporters from airing 'slanderous' news, and a ban on rallies is still carried out through a "no permit-no rally" policy. Up to now, to stage a rally against the Arroyo regime in the capital city is to incur police dispersal, as permits are not usually granted even if one applies for it weeks in advance.

Lull Before the Storm

A period of quiet in the political scene seems to have set in after the lifting of the emergency rule. But this is merely the proverbial lull before the storm. All the contending forces are gathering strength and gearing up for a new confrontation. The military rebels said that although their leaders are being hunted with a bounty of millions of pesos, their forces are intact and are still ready to do battle. The elite opposition groups are trying to bounce back by mounting a new impeachment bid at Congress, or by continuing with their conspiracies against the regime. Meanwhile, the Arroyo regime has been desperately pushing for a constitutional change that will give it a new lease on life for the time being. On March 26, Arroyo mobilized her minions at the barangay (village) level to start a signature campaign that will amend the Constitution and adopt a parliamentary system. Local government officials and local ward leaders received wads of money and loads of goods to carry out the campaign.

The militant forces, on the other hand, are preparing for an upsurge. They are building strength at the base and expanding the ranks by recruiting new forces, especially those who have joined the series of protests against emergency rule.

Soon there will be a new clash. The contending forces are still locked in combat and are preparing for the ultimate collision. Leaders of the mass movement believe that the movement must prepare itself for a conflagration of mass struggles not only in the city centers but in the various municipalities and communities in the country. The mass movement will have to draw the broadest united front against the Arroyo regime, while maintaining its links with the rebel soldiers who constitute its main ally in the establishment of a transitional revolutionary regime. #

P.S.

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