

State of Emergency in the Philippines: Back to the Future

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ON 23 February, the very day when Filipinos were to mark the 20th anniversary of the “People Power” uprising which ended Ferdinand Marcos’ dictatorship, Marcos-style dictatorship made a come-back: this time, in an attempt to prevent another “People Power.” That day, President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo declared a “state of national emergency” after preempting plans by a group of soldiers to turn their back on her and join thousands of protesters in the streets.

This aborted climax is just the latest episode in a simmering political crisis which first erupted in June 2005 with the release of audio tapes allegedly proving that the President cheated in the 2004 elections. Since then, calls for the President’s resignation or ouster have grown louder and louder. Defying government restrictions, protesters have been marching on the streets every week, and at times even daily. A dizzying web of political coalitions against the President, each with different configurations of ideologies, has been spun and re-spun.

If this most recent crisis was initially just about the political survival of Arroyo, it is now fast turning out to be about something much bigger than the President herself. While the fall-out from the tape scandal could have easily been contained in its early stages, a confluence of events have paved the way for a continuing stand-off which has polarized domestic political forces. Arroyo’s fate is now incidental. Beneath the coup plots, shadow plays, and shifting alliances in the days and weeks ahead is the old protracted struggle for power in the Philippines.

DEMOCRACY LITE

After the fall of Ferdinand Marcos in 1986, Philippine conservative ruling elites aided by the United States moved quickly to reinstate the pre-dictatorship political system that had since Spanish colonial rule allowed them to entrench their economic dominance over society.

Smarting from the lessons of Marcos’ dictatorship, and seeing that authoritarianism was not necessarily the most effective way to maintain their collective grip on power, the elite leaders restored civil liberties, but restricted democracy to mere electoral contests that - given the ossified distribution of wealth and power in the Philippines - remained structurally skewed in their favor.

Dubbed variably as “low-intensity democracy”, “limited democracy” or “polyarchy” by academics, the post-1986 consensus became both the linchpin of stability and the source of legitimacy for Philippine ruling elites.

Through elections, the elite factions were able to manage competition among themselves while eschewing outsiders who lacked the resources required to challenge them at the ballot box. Those who won the elections were able to command obedience from the masses - not by force as in a dictatorship, but by reminding them that they (the leaders) were the people’s choice.

Having dominated the state through the electoral process, the ruling elites have countered challenges to their rule by successfully thwarting persistent demands for a redistribution of power,

wealth and economic opportunities.

One rough measure of the entrenched inequality: on the eve of the first “people power” uprising in 1985, the top 10% of the population took 37% of the total national income; the lowest 20% garnered a mere 5%. Twenty years later, judging by the latest available official data, the top 10% still controls 36% — more than one third — of the national pie, while the lowest 20% nibbles on just 5%.

CHALLENGED FROM OUTSIDE, CRUMBLING WITHIN

Despite its strengths, the post-1986 political system itself has also been inherently unstable.

For some reason, the masses couldn’t be contented with just being given ballots; they also wanted food on their table, a roof on their head, a job to earn a living - things which the post-1986 political order has not been able to deliver to the vast majority of Filipinos. Twenty years after the “People Power” uprising, 57% of Filipinos still consider themselves poor - slightly higher than the 55% who did in 1983. Up to 20% are unemployed and as many as 2,000 Filipinos leave the country every day to work abroad. Economic growth has clearly failed to trickle down to the base of the pyramid, the promises of globalization notwithstanding.

This evident failure to lift the lives of millions of Filipinos - much more than any allegations of cheating and corruption - has considerably eroded the legitimacy of the political order. At the same time, even as the system itself expanded the ranks of the excluded and fueled resentment, it also has had to extend freedoms that then strengthened the movements calling for substantive - as opposed to “low-intensity” - democracy. The openness afforded by “democracy lite” ironically accounts for the continuing vibrancy of the Left in the country.

Increasingly challenged from peripheral political actors, political elites were also increasingly challenged by divisions from within. Historically, internal stability depended on consensus in putting their collective elite interests above the narrow interests of individual factions. This, however, has recently not been the case.

In January 2001, elite factions displaced by Joseph Estrada’s presidency seized on widespread anger at alleged corruption inside his government and rode to power on the wave of another people-power-type uprising.

In an alleged rigging of the 2004 elections - and by being reckless enough to get caught speaking privately with supposedly neutral election officials - Arroyo attracted the ire of fellow elites. The other elite factions, for their part, seized on the scandal and are now trying to knock her from power. But by adamantly standing her ground, Arroyo has further stretched the limits and contradictions of the established political order.

THE DIVIDED FRONT

The post-1986 political consensus is now under unprecedented strain. Weakened by internal wranglings, the once-united front of the ruling elites is quickly crumbling. With very little economic progress to show for the past two decades, the government is finding it difficult to exact consent from the middle and lower classes. It is in this larger context that the current political crisis is unfolding.

Beneath the confusing web of coalitions and alliances among powerful families, politicians, military factions, religious groups and civil-society organizations, the fundamental political division in the Philippines today is between those who want to preserve their position of dominance in society and those who want to dislodge them. Overlaid on this polarization is the divergence between those who

want to salvage the post-1986 system and those who want to dismantle it.

The problem for those who want to hang on to the power, however, is that their proposed solutions to the current crisis have all been dead ends.

To deflect calls for her ouster, Arroyo has been pushing for constitutional revisions that, among other recommendations, would change the government from a presidential to a parliamentary system, which critics argue could be even more easily manipulated by the elites. The ruling class has been concerned by the power that direct presidential elections gives to the masses, as demonstrated by the election of Estrada - who, while a member of the ruling class himself, appealed to the poor by stoking their class resentments and, notably, was not anointed by traditional elites.

The constitutional solution Arroyo proposes has not gained political traction, however, and is unlikely to overcome formidable opposition. Faced with threats both from other elite factions and from the left, Arroyo has resorted to authoritarian measures, further undermining the post-1986 system of "limited democracy". The reimposition of what amounts to martial law by the recent declaration of a "state of emergency" and other authoritarian proclamations signals the willingness of Arroyo's government to resort to force when all else fails. [The state of emergency was imposed on 23 February and lifted on 3 March.]

The anti-Arroyo factions that also strive to salvage the current political order have likewise only shot blanks. Drawing its constituency from rightists and centrists, and those leaning center-left, this motley political grouping is represented by the Aquinos [the political family dynasty symbolised by Cory Aquino, who was president post-Marcos], the Catholic hierarchy, and the business class, as well as social liberals and democrats.

Most of them have come together under the banner of the so-called Black and White Movement. At first, they pushed for strict adherence to the constitutional order and initially called for the succession of Vice President Noli de Castro to the presidency. But this has since been abandoned because de Castro still supports Arroyo, and even people from within their ranks see him as too lightweight to safeguard their interests competently.

They later supported last year's impeachment proceedings against the president. After that move was blocked by pro-Arroyo legislators, who still dominate Congress, some of them have started pushing for special elections - in short, a continuation of the post-1986 system of electoral democracy, although without Arroyo at the helm.

IN TRANSITION

On the other side of this jagged divide are those who seek to dismantle the system altogether. Though they have different motivations, tactics and political alternatives, they have come around to a common conclusion: their solutions would require an extra-constitutional intervention and would not be bound by the parameters of the post-1986 political system.

On one end of this spectrum are those who feel that so-called "limited democracy" cannot be relied on to preserve order; its openness has only been exploited by so-called "communists" and by corrupt elites. This camp includes rightist civilian and military factions who want to establish a military or civilian-military junta, as well as factions inside the Arroyo government who are advocating repressive measures beyond those formally allowed under so-called "low-intensity" democracy.

Another point on this continuum is the tactical alliance among elite anti-Arroyo opposition groups, most of them right-wing groups linked to Estrada, but also including well-known personalities with

leftist backgrounds, some associated with the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP). Grouped under the Solidarity Movement, they are calling for a “transitional council” that will be composed of opposition politicians and some leaders of the party.

The politicians apparently see this as a way to regain power and restore elite democracy under their command. The CPP, for its part, presumably sees this as a chance to infiltrate the highest echelons of the state, even as it continues to implement its military strategy of encircling cities from the countryside and seizing power through armed insurrection.

Another section under the Left’s banner is the Laban ng Masa (Fight of the Masses) coalition. They are calling for a “transitional revolutionary government” (TRG) - without conservative elite forces represented in the leadership. This umbrella coalition brings together a diverse group of leftist political forces: Leninists together with autonomous social movements and non-governmental organizations, Maoists together with left-party formations that do not see the seizure of the state as the priority, socialists, left-liberals, greens, and others.

Most of the political blocs included here broke away from the CPP in the 1990s, and the coalition is the highest level of tactical and political unity they have achieved since then.

According to the coalition, the TRG’s aim is to institute economic and political changes that have so far been resisted by the elites, such as land reform and the reversal of neo-liberal economic policies such as privatization and free trade. Elections will then resume once their conditions are met.

‘AMERICAN APPROVAL’

As different groups and factions scramble for power, the US Embassy has become a very popular destination. “What everyone is trying to do,” confided one of the cabinet secretaries who recently resigned and joined the anti-Arroyo movement, “is to get American approval.” Even the government has no illusions as to what the embassy can do: “If the Americans decide to drop support of the Philippine president, it crumbles,” the president’s former chief of staff, Rigoberto Tiglao, has acknowledged. [1]

That has been borne out historically. The Philippines was a US colony until 1946, but even thereafter Washington regularly intervened politically by financing preferred candidates and groups, conducting widespread covert operations, and helping to stage-manage elections.

In 1950, a US National Security Council document stated that among the United States’ goals in the country was the maintenance of “an effective government which will preserve and strengthen the pro-US orientation”. In 1972, the US supported the declaration of martial law because, as a US Senate report put it, “Military bases and a familiar government in the Philippines are more important than the preservation of democratic institutions.”

When Marcos finally became more of a political liability than an asset to the US, Washington immediately transferred its support to the anti-Marcos elite factions, attempted to unify them, and ensured that they would call the shots in the anti-dictatorship movement.

All these were critical strategies to guarantee that the outcome of people power would not be inimical to US interests. How exactly the US is playing its hand during the current crisis may not be known for years to come.

Since the crisis began, however, US officials have repeatedly stated that they would oppose another “people power” incident.

TIRED BUT WISER

Unless Arroyo voluntarily resigns or goes along with counter-elite plots to preserve the current political order, another people-power-type uprising is still what most of the groups seeking the president's ouster are leveraging to force a political transition. Whether the outcome of another popular uprising will be special elections, a transitional council or a transitional revolutionary government is still unclear. Until now the two critical elements for past successful uprisings are still apparently missing: the support of the military and hundreds of thousands of people on the streets.

In the military, cracks are showing. The government may have foiled recent coup movements by some military factions, but it has not put an end to the restiveness inside the barracks.

And the fissures in society are increasingly being reflected in the chain of command. A nationalist, and some say progressive, bloc composed mostly of junior officers, is reported to be emerging. But as outside the barracks, the military is divided between those who are committed to defending the existing political order and those who want to reconstruct it. The question is, who will strike first and who will remain standing?

So far, the only political force that has been able to fill the streets on a sustained basis, though on a limited scale, is the organized left. Some analysts attribute the general public's refusal to join them to a so-called "people power fatigue", and view this as implicit approval of Arroyo and the existing political system.

The other explanation, however, is that the people are not tired, only wiser: having seen how the previous uprisings only led to the replacement of one elite faction with another, and witnessing no real change in their economic well-being, they may be loath to support another merry-go-round at the top. If this is true, then they are just waiting for the right reason and the right moment to come out.

Note

1. Raymond Bonner and Carlos H Conde, "In Manila, US drawn into fight", New York Times, July 23, 2005.

P.S.

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