

Military Intervention: Definitely a Cure Worse than the Disease

Saturday 8 April 2006, by [BELLO Walden](#) (Date first published: 24 March 2006).

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It is becoming increasingly clear that the main beneficiary of the stalemate between an unpopular and illegitimate president and a weak opposition is the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP).

The president has stayed in power mainly by pampering senior officers and keeping a critical mass of them loyal to her.

Unable to break the stalemate through a civilian-based “People Power” uprising, key sectors of the opposition have been none too subtle in making the military know that only they can get rid of the president.

To think that she can indefinitely keep the bulk of the military loyal to her through plum appointments, frequent reshuffling, and bribery is a desperate illusion on the part of Arroyo. And to think that they can persuade the military to depose Arroyo, then expect the officers to return to the barracks is breathtakingly naive on the part of the opposition. Indeed, it is alarming to see some progressive personalities express certainty that, as one of them put it, “the military will only come in to oust Gloria, then leave the succession to civilians because they realize they know nothing about running a government.”

Three Currents

The military is one of the most opaque institutions in Philippine society. But there are indications that there are probably three key currents that are sweeping through it at this point.

One is that of the constitutionalists, the officers that believe in civilian supremacy. It is likely that, with the way that civilian politicians have destroyed the democratic promise of the 20-year-old EDSA state, the position of this current has been badly eroded.

The second current is that of the extra-constitutionalists, the people who believe that only via military intervention and the leading role or participation of the military in political leadership that the nation can be set on the right path. This appears to be a current that is strong mainly among junior officers, though some senior field commanders of elite units like the Marines and the Scout Rangers seem to have decided on this path as well. Though not yet dominant, this current is likely to gain more credibility among the officer corps as the civilian stalemate continues.

The third current, which apparently is dominant at the moment, is not willing to do away with formal

civilian leadership, but is keen to take advantage of the weakness of civilian politicians to expand the power and institutional prerogatives of the armed forces. Over the last few years, this current has practically shaken off civilian surveillance in the area of national security and carried out at will its preferred policies of dealing with the left and with the insurgency. The systematic killing of militants, which is reaching epidemic proportions, is part of this determined expansion of institutional power. While the drive to criminalize some representatives of the left in Congress may serve Arroyo's survival in the short term, it is the military, with its agenda to completely control national security matters, that will benefit strategically. Major General Jovito Palparan, Jr., who has left a trail of killings of activists in Mindoro, Samar, and Central Luzon, is a hero to folks within this current.

A weak civilian leadership behind which the military becomes the real power in "internal security" issues—a process that involves the systematic weakening of constitutionally guaranteed human rights, political rights, and due process—is apparently the preferred arrangement for key sectors in the high command at this point. Having experienced scorn and popular disapproval for the AFP's being the chief pillar of dictatorial rule under Marcos, these officers feel that overt and direct leadership that the military radicals of the second current propose may again invite the institutional crisis and disarray that afflicted the armed forces in the early EDSA years.

This is not to say that this group will never sanction or support a coup attempt against Arroyo. Once the costs, in terms of growing institutional fissures, of keeping a discredited president in power, become too great, these "pragmatic institutionalists" may either remove her directly or allow "unauthorized" military units to move against her. At this point, the agenda of the pragmatic institutionalists may fuse with that of the military radicals in the second current. This fusion is increasingly a likely scenario, for as former President and General Fidel Ramos noted recently, with the military so thoroughly politicized over Arroyo's continued stay in power at this point, there will be no end to mutinies in the ranks.

Crisis of Liberal Democracy

What civilian leaders that subscribe to an "intervene-then-withdraw" scenario fail to appreciate is that the radical agenda of the second current within the AFP finds fertile ground in the population at this point. The reason that Filipinos are not out in the streets like the people are in Thailand is that there is throughout the Philippines at this juncture tremendous disillusionment with liberal democracy. My personal brush with this sentiment has been in the classroom, among youth and students who are normally expected to be the bulwarks of progressive sentiment. . A few months ago, two thirds of my undergraduate class in political sociology at the University of the Philippines said that current Philippine democracy is "not worth saving." More recently, I asked a class of young graduate students at another center of learning whether their parents would prefer current democratic freedoms or support their being curtailed by an authoritarian regime in exchange for economic growth. The response: 95 per cent said their parents would definitely prefer the latter.

These are, of course, not scientific samples, but if we view them in the light of the consistently small numbers of people in the anti-Gloria protests, then it is cause for trepidation for those of us who still believe that while democracy has serious flaws, other forms of governance are worse.

In the long term, only a program that goes beyond formal political rights and makes economic equality, serious poverty reduction, and rapid development a central concern will be able to regain and maintain people's faith in democracy. But in the short term, an emergency effort must be launched to oppose the erosion of political rights by the combination of Arroyo's desperation tactics,

popular cynicism, and the military's expansion of its prerogatives via salami tactics.

Rules of Engagement

Very important are the following rules of engagement, the violation of which will certainly lead to the collapse of liberal democratic politics:

- Arroyo must go, but this must be the outcome of a civilian political process.
- Soldiers must be encouraged to participate in this process as individual citizens, but the military as an institution—like the Church as an institution (a topic I touched in an earlier column)—must be barred from it.
- Both the anti-Arroyo forces and the AFP must realize that there is a world of difference between the military standing aside while a civilian process resolves the constitutional crisis and one in which military units actively move to remove Arroyo, which was apparently the plan last February 24. The first is the only legitimate posture; the second is out of bounds.

These rules of engagement must be accompanied by several urgent steps on the part of the AFP and the citizenry:

- The AFP high command must decisively repudiate Arroyo's invoking measures such as the declaration of a state of emergency that have nothing to do with national security and everything with her illegitimate effort to hang on to the presidency.
- Civil society must organize to denounce and stop the AFP's expansion of its institutional power and denounce its trampling of basic human and civil rights and human rights and due process. Among other things, it must demand the immediate relief of General Palparan from his command.
- In this regard, one might disagree, as I do, with some of the political goals and methods of the radical left, but the latter are entitled to the same basic rights as all citizens. Political assassinations and arbitrary arrests, such as the arrest of Rep. Crispin Beltran and the threat to apprehend four other members of Congress, simply have no place in our political order. Moreover, allowing the military to isolate and repress the radical left with little protest, will guarantee that repression will fall on an even wider political circle next time as the military expands its control of the political process.

In sum, getting rid of Arroyo is an urgent task, but the way we citizens do it is just as important as our goal. Asking the military to intervene as an institution to oust this illegitimate powerholder is a cure that will eventually prove worse than the disease.

P.S.

* Published in "Business World" (Philippines), 24 March 2006.