

Philippines: 'The crowd is the statement' — Rally is largest since start of NBN crisis

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MANILA, Philippines — Festive was Friday's interfaith rally, which was marked by prayer, poetry and presidential clout, with a warning of God's wrath thrown in.

Peaceful, too, with a strong youthful vein running through the rally site in Makati City, despite the fact that it was held to express outrage, demand truth and accountability. and call for the resignation of President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo.

"This is that kind of rally," said Makati Business Club (MBC) executive director Alberto Lim, pointing at the thick crowd spreading in four directions from the intersection of Ayala and Paseo de Roxas Avenues.

"This is an interfaith gathering; there is no shouting slogans against imperialism, etc., which turns off many people," Lim said. "This rally is peaceful. The people here are in a merry mood."

"The crowd is the statement," he said, adding that the rally was "just the beginning."

It was the largest crowd yet since Ms Arroyo's latest crisis erupted.

Renato Reyes, secretary general of the militant Bagong Alyansang Makabayan (Bayan), observed that the rally was "the strongest rejection yet of the administration in three years" and "an encouraging sign of political maturity."

Ironically, "the President made this possible," Reyes said. "She provided the urgency for everyone to set aside their differences and struggle together for truth and justice,"

The rally gathered together two former presidents—Corazon Aquino and Joseph Estrada—as well as bishops and religious leaders of various faiths, businessmen and other professionals, activists, and large delegations of students.

It made for an odd sight—Aquino in her trademark yellow dress and Estrada in red jacket, blue shirt and jeans and orange rubber shoes sharing space and stage as well as a cry for truth.

"I am glad about Cory being here," Estrada said, referring to Aquino by her nickname. "After all, she was the one responsible for bringing back democracy to our country."

As for himself, he said, "I just want to be remembered as the man who championed the cause of the poor."

The rally ended peacefully shortly before 9 p.m., with the crowd singing the protest anthem "Bayan Ko."

Low, high estimates

Crowd estimates ranged from 15,000 to 80,000.

The chief of the Makati police, Supt. Gilbert Cruz, declined to give a figure, saying he had not been authorized to do so.

Director Geary Barias, chief of the National Capital Region Police Office, told the Inquirer that the corner of Ayala and Paseo de Roxas measured half a hectare, or 5,000 square meters.

"So if you have three people per square meter, our crowd estimate is 15,000 people. If you have four people per square meter, it might be too crowded," Barias said.

An officer of the Makati police said: "It could be around 17,000 to 18,000, but to be safe, let's say 15,000."

Organizers pegged the crowd at 75,000 but a radio report said Makati Mayor Jejomar Binay estimated 80,000.

"This is a good start," Sonia Roco, widow of Sen. Raul Roco, said in an interview backstage.

According to the organizers, the gathering is the biggest indignation rally since National Broadband Network scandal erupted late last year.

Said Fr. Joe Dizon of Solidarity Philippines: "This large crowd is a strong message to GMA (Ms Arroyo). She must be able to read the writing on the wall—and that is for her to go, for the interest of the nation, or she will face a situation that she will regret later on."

Rare move

Lim, who usually speaks for the MBC, the umbrella organization of the Philippines' biggest corporations, said it did not issue a statement at the rally.

"It seems very successful and very peaceful," he said. "We believe there will be more until she (Ms Arroyo) steps down."

The MBC and private-sector groups extended full support to the rally in terms of money for expenses and key members adding to the warm bodies.

Lim said it was a rare move for the group in the sense that it chose carefully the kind of rally it would back.

He said the MBC committed to shoulder between a third and a fifth of the expenses incurred in organizing the rally, but refused to quote a definite figure.

Who's who

Lim said the MBC trustees who were among the crowd were its chair Ramon del Rosario Jr., vice chair Roberto F. de Ocampo, and Jose L. Cuisia Jr. and David L. Balangue.

Del Rosario also chairs the Phinma group, Cuisia is president of Philamlife, and De Ocampo is trustee of the Asian Institute of Management.

Balangue, who is chair and managing partner of accounting firm SGV & Co., is also president of the Financial Executives Institute of the Philippines, another group that has called on Ms Arroyo to step down.

Lim said another allied leader, Management Association of the Philippines president Alberto del Rosario, was among the crowd.

Asked whether the other MBC vice chair, the Ayala group's Jaime Augusto Zobel de Ayala, was around, Lim pointed to the nearby Ayala Tower I building and said: "He's there watching from the 34th floor."

Prayers, fiery speeches

Film producer Armida Siguion Reyna read a poem to kick off the program interspersed by chants and songs and punctuated by intermittent showers of confetti.

Religious leaders took turns in saying prayers for the administration to account for charges of corruption arising from the \$329-million NBN deal with China's ZTE Corp.

And despite the "prayerful atmosphere," the speakers delivered fiery messages calling on Ms Arroyo to step down.

"We are so saddened because our leader refuses to tell the truth. It's simple: she only needs to tell [former Socioeconomic Planning Secretary Romulo] Neri, 'I ask you, tell the truth.' One sentence from GMA and we will know the truth," Bishop Teodoro Bacani said.

"But two bishops I was talking to, told me: 'If she does that, she's finished.' I don't know if that's the truth. Do you want to do it now? We want the truth," he said.

The crowd roared back: "We want the truth!"

Bacani continued: "Gloria, lead the search for truth." The crowd echoed it.

"What might come up is 'Go, liar,'" he said, eliciting laughter.

The other speakers also demanded accountability and justice from the administration for the killing of activists and church workers.

Bishop Jessie Suarez of the United Church of Christ in the Philippines said: "We have been looking for justice. Because we have the [biggest] number of victims of extrajudicial killings. No one has been punished." We share your prayer: Lord, deliver us from evil. Tama na, sobra na, bumaba na kayo diyan! [Enough is enough. Step down!]" Said Bishop Godofredo David of the Iglesia Filipina Independiente (the Philippine Independent Church): "We agree with the call of the entire Filipino nation for the one who has no right to stay there, to step down."

Green balloons

In a stirring moment, organizers released green balloons into the air, as a youngster sang a gospel song and confetti rained on the crowd below.

Aquino urged the crowd to keep on praying for truth: "Let's continue praying. We know what can help us in these times. I thought I'm finished with all this because I'm old. But the call of the times is for us to be unified to end this deception and know the truth."

After her, Estrada strode to the front of the stage to chants of "Erap, Erap, Erap" and delivered his own brief message.

United Opposition spokesperson Adel Tamano noted that Aquino and Estrada's presence in a single

venue was an indication of different politics coming together for one cause.

Aquino's son, Sen. Benigno Aquino III, agreed, saying it meant that "people are coming together to make a stand that they have had enough."

When his turn to speak came, the charismatic Jesus Is Lord leader Bro. Eddie Villanueva led the crowd in prayer, with almost everyone raising their hands in the air.

He aired three prayer appeals, including one calling on the President to "heed the will of the people," and another calling on the Armed Forces to protect the people, not just one family.

Thunderous applause

Thunderous applause was reserved for Rodolfo "Jun" Lozada, star witness at the Senate inquiry into the NBN scandal, whose presence was announced a few minutes after the two former Presidents left at past 6 p.m.

Jose de Venecia III, son and namesake of the former Speaker of the House and the first to blow the whistle on the NBN deal with China's ZTE Corp. also made an appearance, drawing loud cheers.

Middle class

"Rally newbies"—the middle-class groups—admitted that the assembly provided them a venue to voice their outrage alongside the "usual suspects," or the activists.

"We're not really regulars at rallies, but we want to be able to show our outrage and anger through prayer and song," said Leah Navarro of the Black and White Movement.

The group came with its urban poor arm, the BWM Katipunan.

Among the other personalities seen present were former Vice President Teofisto Guingona, Sen, Panfilo Lacson, Gina de Venecia, Estrada's wife former Sen. Luisa Ejercito and their daughter Jackie, former Trade Secretary Josie Lichauco and former Social Welfare Secretary Corazon "Dinky" Soliman.

P.S.

* From the Philippine Daily Inquirer:

<http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/inquirerheadlines/nation/view/20080301-122098/The-crowd-is-the-state-ment>

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