



THE “CINEMA STATE” IN/OF THE PHILIPPINES

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On Friday 24th February 2006, by Presidential Proclamation N° 1017 the President of the Philippines, Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, declared a State of Emergency in the country in order, ostensibly, to deal with the threat of a coup involving “leftwing activists and right-wing military adventurers”. Justifying its actions, the government claimed that it had uncovered a coup involving disaffected military officers, codenamed Operation “Oplan Hackle”, that was to be launched the following weekend when members of the military would join in protest demonstrations against the incumbent president. Six left wing members of the Filipino Congress remain barricaded in parliament to avoid arrest and a list of leftist militants were accused of rebellion, including the exiled leader of the Communist Party of the Philippines, José Maria Sison, and the leader of the National Democratic Front, Luis Jalandoni. This list also included a host of characters - seemingly straight out of a Tagalog sit-com - such as Kim, Tasio, Randy and Rose... as well as several John and Jane Does.



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A mutiny by members of the Marines Corps was quickly resolved. In scenes reminiscent of the last failed mutiny in July 2003, in which 300 members of another elite unit joyfully took over a shopping centre in the salubrious Makati business district for several hours: the disgruntled soldiers were scolded and sent back to their barracks. Two senior officers, Brig. Gen Danilo Lim of the Scout Rangers and Col. Ariel Querubin of the Marines, were placed under arrest and declared “habitual delinquents”: both had been involved in a previous coup attempt in 1989. With the promise to engage in dialogue with ordinary enlisted men, Arroyo lifted the “State of Emergency” one week later on 3rd March, although a number of its instruments, notably the arrest warrants, a ban on demonstrations and the threat of press censorship remain.

THE PROMISE OF THE PHILIPPINES

On one level the comic opera in the events of late February early March could simply be dismissed as once again demonstrating the theatrical side of Filipino political life. Beyond this there is a need to examine the root causes of the chronic didfunctioning in a country so proud of its democratic credentials. Rarely has a people in Asia seen so many hopes dashed. The first colony in Asia to declare independence in 1898, the first ephemeral republic was quickly quashed in the brutality and then benevolence, the “guns” and “ballots”, of US colonisation that lasted till the granting of autonomy in 1935 followed by independence in 1946. Having barely recovered from the destruction of Japanese occupation and internal insurgency, the Huk rebellion, and the death of perhaps its only effective president, Ramon Magsaysay, the Filipinos found themselves pawns in the larger game of the Cold War in Asia. As home of the most important US military bases overseas (till their closure in 2000) incompetent and, above all, corrupt presidents enjoyed considerable US backing¹. Yet the long period of dictatorship under Ferdinand Marcos from 1972 till 1986 was in the end so grotesque in the corruption and cronyism it engendered and the plundering of the national economy – the Marcos family are estimated to have siphoned off between \$5 and \$10 billion into overseas accounts – that in the end the Reagan administration withdrew its support.

Marcos’s departure was above all the result of massive demonstrations against the unprecedented fraud perpetuated in the 1986 presidential election that had denied victory to his opponent, Cory Aquino, wife of the assassinated opposition leader Senator Benigno Aquino. People Power 1 – or EDSA 1 in reference to the main thoroughfare where the mass assemblies occurred – with its cast of berobbed bishops, uniformed officers, movie and rock

¹ For an overview of the US role in Filipino political life see Amy Blitz, *The Contested State: American Foreign Policy and Regime Change in the Philippines*, Lanham MD, Rowman & Littlefield, 2000.

stars, supported by the 'masa', the poor of Manila mingling with middle class trendies – became a powerful symbol of political change in Asia.

Despite initial overwhelming popular support, Aquino's period as president from 1986 till 1992, however, was to prove disappointing. While a new constitution was drafted in order to avoid some of the excesses of the Marco period, other hopes of reform, especially critically important land reform, were dissipated. Constantly under the threat of military coups from an officer corps that had become politicized under Marcos, and beholden to the Catholic Church for her legitimacy, the Aquino presidency was a holding operation with one and only one objective, the consolidation of electoral democracy, even if this involved a return to the pre-martial law practice of oligarchical rule. At least her presidency paved the way for a peaceful transmission to her successor, Fidel Ramos, under whom the economy started to catch up with its neighbours due to a degree of internal reforms, liberalisation and an opening up to FDI. Ramos also made some timid efforts at land reforms, signed a peace agreement with Muslim separatists in Mindano and even introduced a family planning scheme to deal with endemic population growth.

Constitutionally unable to run for a second term, Ramos was succeeded by his Vice President, Joseph 'Erap' Estrada, a former senator and, above all, movie star, noted for his roles as the good cop. Campaigning on a populist platform as the "friend of the poor", Erap (from, 'pare', buddy, spelt backwards) was elected with approximately 40% of the votes, despite opposition from the Catholic Church and considerable hostility from the business community. Estrada's drinking and womanising, including the seven luxury houses built for his mistresses, may have been grist for the mill of the popular press, but this seemed only to endear him with his supporters. It was, above all, Estrada's own graft and corruption - including receiving large amounts from illegal gambling - and his bizarre governing style with his drinking mates in his "midnight cabinet" and the favouring of cronies from the Marcos period that, in the end, lead to attempts to impeach him. When these attempts were blocked in the Senate by his supporters, an alliance of business and of the hierarchy of the Catholic Church lead to a replay of massive middle class demonstrations in what became known as People Power 2 or EDSA 2. While, constitutionally speaking, the attempts to unseat Estrada were dubious, once the head of the armed forces and the Philippine National Constabulary declared they no longer supported him, the Supreme Court named the Vice President, Arroyo, as his replacement. Arroyo, a former senator and the daughter of a former Filipino president, with her doctorate in economics from the US and, like Cory Aquino, her avowed piety, seemed to offer a reassuring return to normality. After the Estrada anomaly Filipino politics had once again been transformed to protect vested interests.

Yet Estrada's supporters in the slums and his home province felt cheated and several months after EDSA 2 they attempted to march on the presidential palace in an event known as EDSA 3. While the demonstration was violently repressed, a simmering discontent with Arroyo's usurpation of power remained. Once again this discontent was transformed into electoral populism: both Estrada's wife Luisa and his son Jose, also a former movie star, were to be elected senators.

As an unelected president, Arroyo began on rather shaky grounds even more beholden than Aquino to the same forces. Both the Church would be kept onside, by scuttling the family planning programme, and senior officers in the military would be assuaged through promotion and appointment to lucrative positions in the Administration or in the corporate sector. Following "divine instructions" Arroyo reneged on an earlier promise and successfully ran for president for a full six year term in April 2004. Her Estrada backed opponent, and like him former movie heartthrob, Fernando Poe Jr, immediately claimed his 3% loss margin was due to electoral fraud leading eventually to a failed attempt to impeach her. While Arroyo herself is not the subject of accusations of graft her businessman husband, Mike, is now in self-imposed exile in order to avoid judicial proceedings. Moreover, the discovery of a recording in which Arroyo had spoken to the chief Electoral Commissioner the night of the election led to calls for her resignation from some of her former supporters.

Other than the declaration of a State of Emergency, Arroyo's response to her own fragility has been to suggest a constitutional change that would see a transformation from a presidency and bicameral congress to a unicameral parliamentary system. Popularly dubbed "cha cha" (for charter change), her proposals have been strongly criticized particularly as it would mean as an interim measure extending the terms of sitting politicians by three years². Above all, the proposals are seen by some as entrenching local fiefdoms and by others as threatening their privileges. The changes are also seen as a means for Arroyo to ensconce herself as Prime Minister, thus avoiding the one term limit on presidents. Certainly there are some doubts as to whether the proposals deal with the root causes of Filipino political instability: bossism and the lack of programmatically organized, independently strong political parties.

² *Asia Times Online* 11/4/06

EXPLAINING FILIPINO POLITICAL INSTABILITY

Beyond the geopolitical factors and personal vicissitudes, five basic factors need to be addressed in order to understand the unique nature of Filipino politics³. The first concerns oligarchical politics. The Philippines is both the only political entity in what today is defined as Southeast Asia not to have possessed political structures above the barangay, ie village, level prior to colonisation and is also the country in which the impact of the colonizers, first the Spanish and then, from 1898, the Americans was the most profound. In the process the village “men of prowess”, became transformed into the caciques of the Spanish period and the local bosses of the US colonial period and of today. However, it would be misleading to suggest that some primeval localism determines the functioning of Filipino political life, for the evolution of the last centuries has been more complex and the institutional structures progressively put in place by the Spanish and above all by the Americans have impacted on its development.

By the end of the nineteenth century an indigenous elite had emerged consisting essentially of metiszo, ie mixed race families, with Spanish, Chinese as well as Malay origins. With the opening up of the economy to world trade and the development of plantations, this essentially land-owning elite became economically empowered. The US was to see that economic empowerment coupled with a high degree of political empowerment as it sought to make their only colony an example of democracy by co-opting the elite. As John Sidel has persuasively demonstrated⁴. Filipino “bossism”, ie forms of patron-client relations, functions within the context of a rhetorically democratic, but in practice elitist, system based on local fiefdoms developed in this period. In the first legislative elections of 1907 a mere 3% of the adult population had the right to vote and even in the 1935 election of the first president of the Philippine Commonwealth this figure was only 14%.

While the oligarchy of land-owning families still plays a disproportionate role in political life, other new dynastic groups dependent on activities in the manufacturing and service sectors have grown. Furthermore as a result of universal suffrage and elections at the national level, there has emerged a differentiation between locally elected politicians (mayors, congressmen, governors) and those elected on a national slate, namely senators and, above all, presidents. Coming from established families and/or, having developed a local power base, the majority of presidential candidates have used the Senate as their

³ Two recent volumes provide contrasting, but complimentary, overviews of Filipino society and Filipino political life: Eva-Lotta Hedman & John Sidel, *Philippine Politics and Society in the Twentieth Century*, London, Routledge, 2000 and Patricio Abinales & Donna Amoroso, *State and Society in the Philippines*, Lanham MD, Rowman & Littlefield, 2005.

⁴ John Sidel, *Capital, Coercion and Crime: Bossism in the Philippines*, Stanford CA, Stanford University Press, 1999.

political springboard. However, since the end of the Marcos dictatorship, and in a hyper-mediatised age, the need to find a national constituency is increasingly favouring movie actors and television personalities. For example in the Senate elected in 2001, 6 of the 24 members were former movie stars, TV anchorman or nationally feted sportsmen.

There were attempts made in the 1987 constitution to eliminate dynastic politics notably by term limits and in creating a proportion of party list seats in the Congress, which has resulted in the token presence of independent left-wing congressmen. However, on the whole, the role of political dynasties has been strengthened. A 2004 study by the Philippine Centre for Investigative Journalism showed that two thirds of the Congress members were from political families. Moreover, the net worth of congressmen had almost tripled between the 9th Congress, elected in 1992, and the 12th, elected in 2001⁵. Above all, a mutual dependency has been created between national level politicians, beholden to local bosses to deliver funds and votes, and local bosses, who are needful of media-savvy and popular national level conduits to protect their interests.

Secondly, the profound religiosity of Philippine society expresses itself in the moral references of political discourse and the unique role of the Catholic Church. Yet in contemporary politics the role of the Catholic Church remains ambivalent. It was the primate of the Philippines, Cardinal Jaime Sin, and the bishops conference that encouraged the departure of Marcos in 1986 and of Estrada in 2001. In the resources provided to the independent election monitoring body, NAMFEL, and in exhorting the faithful on the need to vote, the church has also been a major player in legitimizing the democratic process. Yet this approach has its limits. By concentrating, almost in a liturgical way, on democratic 'rituals', ie elections, the Catholic hierarchy have been much less concerned about substantive democratic results. As Eva-Lotta Hedman has argued most recently⁶, the church must be considered, like the oligarchical elite described above, as part of the ruling dominant bloc. By insisting on the importance of electoralism in a grossly unequal society the Catholic hierarchy unwittingly perpetuates a system in which elite privileges are both well-entrenched and vehemently defended.

Yet, while 80% of Filipinos are Catholics, the Catholic hierarchy finds that its precepts are not always followed. For example, while divorce may be illegal, de facto relationships are common and accepted. Also 35% of Filipino women use contraceptives and between

⁵ Sheila Coronel, *The Rulemakers: How the Wealthy and Well-Born Dominate Congress*, Querzon City, Philippine Centre for Investigative Journalism, 2004.

⁶ Eva-Lotta Hedman, *In the Name of Civil Society: From Free Election Movements to People Power in the Philippines*, Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press, 2006. Her second chapter provides a succinct overview of the ruling elite.

400,000 and 800,000 illegal abortions occur annually.⁷ Moreover, the mainstream Catholic Church finds itself in competition with the dissident Iglesia de Christa, aggressive evangelical protestant sects as well, in its own ranks, a charismatic movement, El Shaddai, that now has some 10 million members. Inspired by US TV evangelists, the “prosperity theology” of these groups, and in particular that of Brother Mike, a former real estate agent turned leader of El Shaddai, sees poverty as essentially an individual problem, to be dealt with through self-help and divine intervention⁸. This quietism has its equivalent in mainstream Catholic doctrine which represents the poverty of the “Church of the Poor” as a privileged site of divine intervention.

A third factor in Filipino political life is the interventionism of the Armed Forces. While the army has never taken on a governing role in the Philippines, the officer corps has become a major political force through its capacity, like that of the Church, to play a king-making role. Military politisization accelerated after the declaration of martial law by Marcos in 1972. In order to maintain his kleptocratic regime he acquired the support of the Armed Forces by granting privileges and by appointing family members and other cronies in its hierarchy. In the end, however his demise was precipitated by the defection to Aquino of his then Defence Minister, Juan Enrile, and his Vice Chief of Staff, General Fidel Ramos. Following the restoration of democracy in 1986, first Aquino and then Ramos found themselves beholden to the military’s leaders.

The military however is more than its senior officers. Modelled on West Point, the Philippine military academy teaches subservience to civilian control and the defence of a democratic society. Underpaid, involved in dangerous and debilitating counter-insurgency activities against the Communist guerrillas of the New Peoples Army in Luzon or Muslim separatists in Mindano, younger officers keenly resent the privileges and wealth of desk-bound senior offices in Manila, and the erratic rule of a dubious civilian leadership. In the Marcos years these dissident offices created RAM, the Reform the Armed Forces Movement, led by Colonel (and later Senator) Gregorio (Gringo) Honasan who soon developed a Robin Hood persona and who now heads the most wanted list published on 24th February! In the present period, YOU, the Young Officers Union, has played a similar role.

⁷ *International Herald Tribune*, 16/5/05.

⁸ See Katharine Wiegele, *Investing in Miracles: El Shaddai and the Transformation of Popular Catholicism in the Philippines*, Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press, 2005.

PARAMILITARY AND CRIMINAL GROUPS

The Philippines holds a number of unfortunate records. According to the human rights group Karapatan, and there have been 400 documented extra-judicial killings since 2001: 83 were leaders and members of two left-wing political parties, such as Bayan Muna; about 70 involved peasants and peasant leaders involved in land and farm labour disputes; 18 labour organizers and workers; 26 unarmed Muslim detainees and 24 journalists, human rights activists including lawyers and clergy⁹. The Philippines had also become the kidnapping capital of Asia with 44 abductions reported to the police in 2005, probably the tip of the iceberg as most Sino-Filipino families do not report abductions. Trafficking of children involves between 60,000 and 100,000 victims annually¹⁰. This litany of violence is not merely the result of criminal activity, it involves the use of private militias and death squads functioning with the acquiescence or, in some cases, even the direct collusion of the army and the police. Crimes are exposed and culprits named by a courageous press and NGOs, yet few are arrested let alone punished. This can only partly be explained by a seeming tolerance of violence in Filipino political life: in the 2004 elections twenty people died in campaigning. Another disturbing aspect is the criminalisation of political violence. The Muslim separatist group Abu Sayyaf in Mindano would appear above all interested in its self-financing through kidnappings and ransoms. As for the National People's Army, the raising of revolutionary taxes would seem to have become an end in itself.

THE MIDDLE CLASS AND FILIPINO DIASPORA

In democratisation literature the development of a middle class is considered a major factor. Middle class mobilisation was a key element in both Peoples Power 1 and People's Power 2. Furthermore, it is members of a salaried middle class, independent from patron-client linkage, who are involved in the rich texture of civil society activity in the Philippines. Yet the Philippine case provides a stark example of the domestic consequences of global flows. Given the lack of opportunities at home, increasing numbers of Filipino's are "voting with their feet"; leaving the Philippines for employment elsewhere. With 10 million Filipinos overseas, the Philippines is, after Mexico and India, the third largest migrant sending country. An Asian Development Bank study estimated that, in 2003, these overseas Filipinos remitted

⁹ James Petras & Robin Eastman-Abaya, "Philippines: the Killing Fields of Asia", *CounterPunch*, 17/3/06.

¹⁰ *The Nation* 17/3/06; *International Herald Tribune* 9-10/4/05

some US\$ 7.6 billion back accounting for about 10.5% of GDP and representing 20% of exports¹¹.

This dependence on the remittances by OFWs (Overseas Filipino Workers) clearly has some beneficial effects, allowing the country to get through the 1997 Asian Economic Crisis and representing 45% of international reserves. This money has also generated a domestic consumer boom. Yet, from a sociological point of view, there are a number of costs, including mono-parental families, a dependency syndrome in some rural communities and a penchant for ostentatious consumption rather than productive investment. Another consequence is, for example, a chronic shortage of nurses given the exodus to infinitely better paid jobs in the US, Europe and parts of Asia, especially Japan. From a political perspective, the costs may be even higher. Given that those who leave are often the most qualified and motivated, their departure means the loss of political actors capable of bringing about domestic change. While Filipinos in the US played a role in the downfall of Marcos, recent evidence would suggest that the newer generation of OFWs seem disinterested in developments in their home country. For example, while it is now possible for overseas Filipinos to register and vote, in the 2004 elections only 368,000 of a potential 1.7 million did so of whom less than half actually voted¹².

CONCLUSIONS

The Philippine case poses two serious questions. The first concerns the role of the media and civil society groups as watchdogs in ensuring social justice. While the Filipino press is the freest and most courageous in Asia, its revelations of graft, corruption and other elite misbehaviour has not been translated into the arrest, prosecution and above all banishment from the political scene of the perpetrators. However the most fundamental question at the very heart of political change at least since the 17th century English revolution, is whether political democracy is viable without at least a degree of substantive economic democracy. In a country where between 40% and 50% of the population are below an already strictly determined poverty line, does liberty and fraternity, to use the stropes of a later revolution, without a degree of equality remain tenable?

¹¹ Asian Development Bank, *Enhancing the Efficiency of Overseas Workers Remittances*, Manila, 2004 (www.adb.org/Documents)? Informal remittances would add another 30% to these figures.

¹² *Financial Times*, 8-9/5/04.