

Fifty truckloads of jellyfish reveal a jittery political atmosphere in the Philippines

Celeste Lopez, Peter Symonds
7 January 2000

Public response to a widespread power blackout at the end of last year speak volumes for the tensions and nervousness within ruling circles in the Philippines and the growing loss of confidence in the government headed by President Joseph Estrada.

The power failure hit the main island of Luzon on December 10 shutting down power for several hours to half of the island's population. Immediately rumours began to circulate that the blackout was part of a putsch against Estrada. Estrada, who was at a tense gathering of Philippine senators at the time, had to dispatch his liaison officer to allay the fears of the guests. So widely believed was talk of a conspiracy in progress that the President was compelled to issue a statement to the effect that the outage was "purely technical in nature and is not related to any political motives".

As it turned out the power failure had been caused by a mass of jellyfish—some 50 truckloads—that had clogged up the intake pumps supplying water to cool power plants in the northern town of Sual. In the aftermath of the incident, Amando Doronila, political commentator for the *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, remarked: "The fact that the President's initial reaction and that of many people invested the power failure with political-conspiracy meaning is revealing. It gave expression to the pervasive atmosphere of political uncertainty that has probably been fanned by forecasts that the President may not finish his term."

The same newspaper had caused a political furore in the Philippines when it published excerpts from a report produced in late November by US business intelligence group, Strategic Forecasting (Stratfor). The report, entitled "Philippine President's Days are Numbered", made the following warning to its readers: "Whether removed by force or by the broad coalition arrayed against him, Estrada is unlikely to fulfill his six-year term in office." It cited Estrada's fall in popularity and the

emergence of opposition protests, and canvassed the possibility of a military coup. Rather than maintaining a dignified indifference to the allegations, Estrada weighed in with strident denials, accusing Stratfor of being in league with his political enemies.

Estrada has plenty of cause for concern. He won the 1998 presidential elections riding a wave of popularity, particularly among the urban and rural poor. A former film star and mayor of San Juan, Estrada, also known as Erap (Buddy), traded on his movie persona as a tough guy and ran under the slogan "Erap for the poor". Some 18 months after taking office, his popularity has largely evaporated. By September, a Pulse Asia opinion poll showed his approval rating had slumped to 61 percent with 21 percent disapproval. By October, it had hit 54 percent with 44 percent expressing open opposition.

The underlying causes for the plummeting polls are not hard to identify. Having promised to lift the living standards of the most downtrodden social layers in urban and rural areas, Estrada surrounded himself with bankers and big businessmen, many of them connected with the former Marcos military dictatorship. Far from implementing policies to help the impoverished masses, his government set about imposing the agenda demanded by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for removing restrictions on foreign investment and maintaining low wages and poor conditions so as to remain "competitive".

One of the rare reports on the social conditions in the Philippines, which appeared in the *San Francisco Chronicle* in June 1999, pointed out high jobless rates and rampant poverty. "Unemployment is at 9 percent, an increase since 1998. About one third of the population or 75 million people live in abject poverty, many in slums along railway lines and on top of garbage dumps."

Estrada demagogically promised to help the poorest 100 people in every town and city in the country. But even if he had kept his pledge, millions are still struggling to

survive from day to day. Real incomes have not increased. The daily minimum wage for Metro Manila is only \$US5 a day while the estimated cost of living is \$US11 a day for a family of six. Two thirds of the poor live in rural areas where most work as sharecroppers, completely dependent on large landowners and loan sharks.

Estrada boasted in the middle of last year that his government had constructed 129,886 housing units, supposedly for low-income families. In reality, middle class families were the only ones who benefitted, as they alone were able to meet the financial requirements necessary to receive and pay off a mortgage.

The growing disaffection with the government resulted in a series of protests around the country to coincide with Estrada's State of the Nation address on July 27. In Quezon City where the speech was delivered, a rally of 25,000 organised by trade unions and non-government organisations (NGOs) protested against declining living standards and broken promises. The demonstration was in marked contrast to the reception Estrada received the previous year when people had lined the road to applaud him.

Thousands more took part in protests elsewhere across the country in Baguio, Cebu, Cagayn de Oro and Davao City. A tricycle driver in Digos summed up the attitude of many: "I have yet to see things that the President mentioned in his speech, such as programs which have benefitted the poor."

Further protests took place in August when an estimated 150,000 people took part in rallies around the country organised by former president Cory Aquino and Catholic Archbishop Jaime Sin. But with the involvement of Aquino and Sin the political focus shifted from concerns over declining living standards to demands that expressed their class interests. Foremost among these was the call for an end to Estrada's proposals for constitutional change, known as Charter Change or more popularly as Cha-Cha, which will remove existing constitutional restrictions on the foreign ownership of land, media and a range of other businesses.

Aquino and Sin accuse Estrada of corruption and seeking to use the constitutional changes to entrench himself in power. But their main concern is the impact of the constitutional amendments on sections of business that will be hit hard by greater competition from an influx of foreign capital. Another round of demonstrations in September involving an estimated 100,000 people coincided with strikes by transport workers in four cities over the spiralling cost of fuel.

None of the issues that sparked the opposition movement have diminished. Estrada is pressing ahead with his proposals for constitutional change. On December 20, the Preparatory Commission on Constitutional Reform (PCCR) appointed by Estrada and headed by former Supreme Court chief justice Andres Narvasa released its report outlining changes in seven areas, including foreign ownership of land, natural resources, media and advertising, public utilities and foreign involvement in the professions.

According to one poll, at least 87 percent of the population is opposed to the constitutional changes. Estrada and his ministers plan to tour the country in January to try to build support in preparation for a national plebiscite next year. Commentator Antonio Gatmaitan quoted in the Singapore-based *Straits Times* warned: "I'm afraid that charter change could be the spark that will widen the opposition to the President. The opposition will personalise the debate and make the President the issue." Opposition leaders have already indicated that protests will be called this month.

In a further sign of instability, Estrada is about to announce a major shakeup in his cabinet. Last November he asked all his ministers to submit their resignations to pave the way for the reshuffle. On Wednesday, Finance Minister Edgardo Espiritu, a lawyer and banker, announced that his letter of resignation was now effective immediately, preempting his dismissal by Estrada. Other major changes are expected when the reshuffle is announced in the next 10 days.

More fundamentally, however, the deepening social crisis is certain to heighten dissatisfaction. Further rises are expected in the price of basic commodities including fuel and rice. Discontent is rife over frozen wages and job losses. A planned four-day national stoppage of local government units was narrowly averted on December 21 after Estrada intervened promising to restore 30 billion pesos (\$US1.15 billion) in funding diverted by the Senate.

If 50 truckloads of jellyfish can provoke the need for a formal presidential denial that a coup is underway then all the conditions for a major political crisis in the Philippines are already in place.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact