

Arroyo bans film at insistence of Philippines Catholic hierarchy

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Two months after her installation as Philippine President, Gloria Macapagal Arroyo has prohibited screenings of *Live Show*, an internationally acclaimed documentary film, and forced the resignation of the country's chief censor because he opposed the ban. Arroyo moved against the film after Manila Archbishop Cardinal Jaime Sin and other Catholic Church leaders called on the government to do so.

Directed by Jose Javier Reyes, the documentary—which Arroyo claimed was “illicit, lewd and offensive”—examines the desperate lives of young Filipino men and women, mainly from rural areas, who perform live sex acts in Manila nightclubs. Also known as *Tora*, it was shown at film festivals in Europe, North America and Australia during 2000, had been approved by the Movie and Television Review and Classification Board (MTRCB), and was already screening in Philippine cinemas.

Prior to its recall, MTRCB chairman Nicanor Tiongson, a well-known film critic and academic was summonsed to a March 18 meeting with Cardinal Sin, who demanded the film's withdrawal. Tiongson, who was appointed chief censor only five weeks earlier on Sin's recommendation, rejected the Archbishop's demand. He later told the press that he was “traumatised” by Sin, who was “reeking with arrogance” and had acted as a “political tactician, not a priest”.

The next day Arroyo told the press that she would remove Tiongson if he did not recall the film—a threat repeated at a meeting on March 20 with the censor. Arroyo, who had not seen the film, attended the meeting with Sonia Zaldivar from the “Anti-Porno Movement” and a delegation of Catholic women's groups. Tiongson told the president he had no legal authority to reverse a decision made by the previous board and would not allow himself to be used as “an instrument for the repression of freedom of expression”.

Arroyo forced Tiongson to resign, asserting the “power of the state to safeguard public morals,” and issued a special presidential order directing cinemas to stop screenings. She appointed a three-member appeals committee—presidential chief of staff Renato Corona, presidential press secretary Noel Cabrera and Council for Catholic Women's Laity chair Sonia Ronda—to view the film. A week later, the committee rubber-stamped Arroyo's demands and officially banned the film.

Because Tiongson had not nominated any new MTRCB

members, Arroyo also appointed 13 new members to the body, with 76-year-old Alejandro Roces as chairman. Roces was secretary of education in the government of Diosdado Macapagal (Arroyo's father) from 1961 to 1965. After the swearing in, Roces told the press that he would ask Congress to amend the country's obscenity laws to re-classify pornography as a criminal offence and make movie directors take professional license examinations.

On March 24, Interior and Local Government Secretary Jose Lina Jr. announced a “Philippine Plan for Anti-Pornography”. Lina declared that the government would launch a nationwide campaign involving religious, non-government, business and media organisations to “fight the tide of evil that is pornography”. He highlighted the announcement with the destruction of more than 3,000 videotapes and video compact discs confiscated in police raids on Manila video shops.

Scores of outraged film directors have spoken out against the *Live Show* ban and defended its director, as well as Tiongson. On March 25, over 300 filmmakers, actors, artists and students carrying placards such as “Yes to expression, No to suppression” and “No to censorship” demonstrated at Mendiola Bridge.

Reyes told the rally: “I am not defending myself because my film is my defence. *Live Show* is not a pornographic film but a movie that mirrors the real condition of our fellow Filipinos.” Another speaker pointed out that televised broadcasts of the Gawad Urian awards (Philippine's main film prizes) had cut all comments about *Live Show* and Arroyo's removal of the chief censor.

Arroyo's banning of *Live Show*, Tiongson's sacking and the crusade against pornography constitute a serious attack on freedom of expression. They are not aberrations, but reveal the rightwing, anti-democratic character of the new regime.

In January, when former president Joseph Estrada was ousted and Arroyo installed, the local and international media hailed the transition as a victory for “People Power,” a blow against corruption and the domination of “trapos,” or traditional politicians.

In reality, Arroyo is a product of the Philippine establishment—the daughter of a president, wife of a businessman and a graduate in economics from Georgetown

University, where she studied alongside Bill Clinton. As vice-president, she became the focus for the move by sections of big business, the Catholic Church and the military to oust Estrada. Former presidents Cory Aquino and Fidel Ramos led the movement, along with Cardinal Sin.

The pretext for removing Estrada, who was elected to office in 1998, was his alleged receipt of illegal kickbacks from gambling and other sources. The real concern in ruling circles, however, lay in Estrada's failure to implement sufficiently quickly the economic restructuring measures being demanded by the IMF.

As the political crisis deepened and the value of the peso plummeted, decisive sections of big business, the state apparatus and the political establishment swung against Estrada and the relatively small anti-Estrada protests led by Arroyo, Aquino and Sin began to swell. The decisive factor, however, was not the demonstrations but the decision by military chiefs to withdraw their support for Estrada, who fled the presidential palace. The Supreme Court rubberstamped Arroyo's installation.

Virtually the entire Philippine "left," including the Communist Party of the Philippines and its various splinter groups and fronts, jumped on the Arroyo bandwagon, claiming that she represented a progressive alternative to Estrada. Just two months later, the banning of *Live Show*, along with Arroyo's other policies, has exposed the new administration's right-wing orientation and will no doubt come as a rude shock to those who were swept along by the rhetoric at the time.

The Directors Guild of the Philippines and the Concerned Artists of the Philippines (CAP), the organisations now denouncing Arroyo's *Live Show* ban and organising protests, played an important role in mobilising support for Arroyo among filmmakers, artists and intellectuals.

In a statement issued at the height of the demonstrations against Estrada, CAP claimed that Filipinos confronted a choice between "good and evil" and had to support Arroyo. CAP declared that Arroyo represented the aspirations of ordinary Filipinos and would end the alleged corruption, incompetence and abuse of power of the previous regime.

Since coming to office, Arroyo has been attempting to shore up her position by appointing her backers to key posts and ingratiating herself to the military and the Catholic Church. But despite all her endeavours, she faces a national election in May, and, according to recent opinion polls, may lose six of the 13 Senate seats to Estrada supporters.

Arroyo's film ban is a direct payoff to Cardinal Sin and the Catholic hierarchy and an appeal for future support—a relationship that will produce further attacks on artistic liberty and other basic democratic rights.

As well as currying favour with the church, Arroyo's actions are directed at winning support from right-wing Christian fundamentalist groups such as God's People Coalition for Righteousness, the Philippine Jesus Movement and the Couples

for Christ, which have widely praised the government's moral crusade.

Arroyo's advisors are no doubt calculating that these organisations will assist during the coming election and provide a future counter-weight to the opposition that will inevitably emerge from the Filipino masses to the new president's economic policies.

Her attack on *Live Show* also diverts attention from the real issues confronting the majority of people—unemployment, poverty and other social problems. What the film pointed to were the desperate social conditions that lead young people into prostitution and other forms of sexual exploitation.

Already more than one third of the country's population lives in dire poverty and, according to recent International Labor Organisation figures, up to 500,000 men, women and children are driven into prostitution and other sectors of the sex-trade. The number of people involved is about the same as the entire manufacturing workforce in the Philippines.

A poll released by Social Weather Stations two weeks ago revealed that 16.1 percent of the population had nothing to eat at least once over the past three months with 6 percent reporting "severe hunger," or having nothing to eat "often" or "always". These statistics set new records. Those living in Visayas and Mindanao showed the highest incidence of hunger in the Philippines at 20 percent and 18 percent, respectively.

Arroyo's finance secretary Alberto Romulo is preparing a budget that will slash \$US1.6 billion from the government budget, axe public sector jobs and provide a tax cut for the rich. These measures will drastically worsen the situation facing the working class and rural poor and bring them into sharp conflict with the Arroyo regime.

The banning of *Live Show*, tougher censorship and attacks on artistic liberty are a warning that Arroyo will not hesitate to use the most anti-democratic measures when confronted with broader opposition to her government and its policies.



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