

Philippine president renews her pledge of loyalty in Washington

John Roberts
28 May 2003

In the nineteenth century, at the height of the British Empire, a stream of potentates, maharajas and other assorted dignitaries made their way to London to pledge fealty to their colonial masters, to be awed by British power and to take home a handful of trinkets and the stamp of British approval.

A modern day version is taking place in Washington—the latest visit being that of Philippine President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo last week. In return for Arroyo's assurances of loyalty and cooperation, Bush lavished praise on the head of the former American colony and offered financial support to prop up her increasingly unpopular administration.

The Arroyo entourage was treated to the pomp and ceremony of a formal state visit complete with a state dinner and reception at the White House—only the third occasion during the Bush presidency that a visiting head of state has received such regal treatment. Bush has already announced that he intends to visit the Philippines later in the year—his first visit to South East Asia.

President George Bush was effusive in his praise of Arroyo as a national leader and her early support for the US “war against terror” and its attack on Iraq. He took the opportunity to bestow the status of “major non-NATO ally” on the Philippines, granting the country greater access to US military technology and equipment. Bush also praised Arroyo's fight against “terrorism” inside the Philippines—the pretext for the dispatch of US troops to the country for the first time in nearly a decade.

Standing next to Bush at the White House, Arroyo signalled her complete support for Washington's open-ended and aggressive foreign policy, declaring: “We are with you in your leadership against terrorism, wherever it may be found.” Her administration has committed a small team of 175 military, police and civilian officials to join the US military occupation of Iraq.

Speaking at a formal dinner of the US-ASEAN Business

Council, US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage indicated why the Bush administration attached such importance to Arroyo's visit. His speech strongly implied that any nation that wanted favourable economic treatment from Washington had to, like the Philippines, fully embrace and support its militarist foreign policy.

Armitage praised Arroyo for her “courageous stand on Iraq” as one of the first leaders to back the US-led invasion and for providing “tangible military assets”. He went on to speak about “a broader truth about this war on terrorism, and that is the inseparable and intertwined nature of prosperity and security. I suspect that those of you from the business community have found in your own experience that you cannot have one without the other.”

In barely disguised terms, Armitage then urged his business audience to take advantage of the new vistas being opened up by the US “war on terrorism”. “Just as the great threats of our day ... have no respect for lines on a map, the great opportunities of our time ... are unconstrained by geography as well. And so today, as we work with our allies in the Philippines and our friends around the world to meet the threats, we are also working to seize the opportunities.”

In South East Asia, Arroyo has been the staunchest supporter of the Bush administration's expansionist policies. While in Washington, Arroyo and Philippine Foreign Secretary Blas Ople agreed to deepen US military involvement in the Philippines. In February, the two governments were forced to drop plans for open US military involvement in operations against the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and the Abu Sayyaf Islamic separatists groups after widespread opposition erupted over its unconstitutional character and the violation of national sovereignty.

During the latest visit, however, alternatives for sidestepping the Philippine constitution were clearly discussed. A senior Defence Department official told the

Washington Post that arrangements had been worked out for “an evolution” of last year’s “training mission” that saw up to 1,200 troops, including advisers and US aircraft, heavily involved in counterinsurgency operations in the country. According to the newspaper, Bush has committed an unspecified number of additional US troops to join the 500 still in the Philippines.

Last November, the Arroyo administration signed a Military Logistics and Support Agreement (MLSA) allowing the US to use the Philippines as a supply base for military operations throughout the region. According to *Washington Post*, the arrangement was exactly what the Pentagon was after. Rather than being committed to large permanent bases, as was previously the case at Subic Bay and Clark Airfield, the US military wanted a more flexible agreement and closer relations with the Philippine armed forces chiefs.

Other economic agreements were signed during last week’s visit. After leaving Washington, Arroyo boasted to an audience of Filipinos in San Francisco on May 22 that her trip had been worth \$4 billion to the Philippines. She referred to \$300 million in social and economic aid promised by Bush and access to hundreds of millions of dollars worth of US military equipment and training.

Included in the total was a payoff to Arroyo for her support for the invasion of Iraq. Manila is to be allowed a small share in the plunder by supplying American companies involved in “rebuilding Iraq” with cheap Filipino labour. At a teleconference in the Waldorf Astoria in New York, Arroyo adviser Marita Jimenez declared that there were opportunities for 30,000 to 50,000 Filipino workers.

In addition, US information technology companies plan to establish call centres in the Philippines to take advantage of English-speaking workers at low wages. Arroyo met the CEOs of Convergys Corporation, Western Wats, and Vision X which expect to employ up to 13,300 workers in the Philippines. The Prudential Group also expressed its intention of outsourcing business processing to the Philippines.

The Bush administration is also becoming more directly involved in the internal affairs of the Philippines. Foreign Minister Ople signed an agreement with the US Agency for International Development to assist former fighters from the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF). The MNLF leadership signed an agreement with Manila to end hostilities in 1996. Washington also committed \$50 million to restart peace talks with the other major armed separatist group, the MILF.

Arroyo’s visit to Washington coincided with a major military offensive against MILF areas in Mindanao. While the military insists that civilians are not being targeted, MILF spokesmen claim that the strikes have been indiscriminate. According to Philippine Senator Aquilino Pimentel, more than 300,000 civilians have been displaced by the government’s offensives.

The US has offered to broker a peace deal with the MILF; but there is no doubt that it has also fully backed the current military offensive. Armitage referred obliquely to the “legitimate aspirations and some grievances” of the poverty-stricken Muslim population of southern Mindanao but left no doubt that Washington supports Arroyo in the fight against “terrorist groups that hide in the shadows of the Philippines”.

Writing in the Manila-based *Sunday Times* last weekend, Toots Ople, chief of staff for the Department of Foreign Affairs, declared that Washington’s political and military support was more important than the economic benefits of the US alliance. “You cannot put a peso value on the initiative of the United States government to have the New Peoples Army and National Democratic Front included in the global list of foreign terrorist organisations,” she wrote.

The reference to Washington’s branding of the New Peoples Army and the National Democratic Front—both connected to the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP)—as terrorist organisations is significant. It reflects an understanding in ruling circles in Manila that the US support for a war on “terrorism” in the Philippines is in fact an open-ended pledge to help suppress any political opposition, no matter how limited, to the deepening economic and social crisis in the country.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact