

Military mutiny in the Philippines: a sign of deeper political tensions

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A mutiny by 300 junior officers and soldiers of the Philippine Armed Forces rapidly came to an end on Sunday after failing to attract broader support either within the military or the population as a whole. The short-lived revolt is nevertheless an indication of disquiet within the ruling elite with President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo over the country's continuing economic stagnation and the ongoing civil war in southern Mindanao.

The revolt began in the early hours of Sunday morning when heavily-armed soldiers from elite special warfare units moved into Makati City, Manila's main financial centre, and occupied the Oakwood Premier Ayala Centre, a high-rise luxury apartment complex used by foreigners and members of the diplomatic corps. The building had been the scene of previous coup attempts during the presidency of Cory Aquino. Among the guests temporarily trapped in the complex was the Australian ambassador to the Philippines.

The rebel soldiers placed explosive charges around the building during the 22-hour revolt. Government soldiers surrounded the area as Arroyo went on national television to demand their surrender, setting, then revising, a deadline. Some commentators noted the casual relations between the mutineers and the soldiers surrounding the area and questioned whether Arroyo would have been obeyed if she had given the order to fire. In any case, the insurrection ended with negotiations and, without a shot being fired, the mutineers returned to their barracks with their weapons and explosives.

While they called for the resignation of Arroyo and the armed forces chief, rebel officers emphasised that they were not engaged in a coup and had only taken the action to air their grievances. Some of those involved had met with Arroyo earlier in the week but remained dissatisfied. Along with complaints about pay and conditions, the group accused the government and the military top brass of corruption, claiming in particular that sections of the military had sold arms to Muslim separatists and had staged bombings in Davao City in order to enlist further military and financial assistance from Washington.

The mutineers pointed to the recent embarrassing escape of convicted bomber Fathur Roman al-Ghozi as further evidence of high-level corruption. Indonesian national al-Ghozi, whom Philippines and Western intelligence agencies claim is a key figure in the Jemaah Islamiah terrorist network, and two Abu Sayyaf prisoners, walked out of the main police compound in Manila, in an escape obviously organised from the inside.

The officers leading the revolt were well-connected. The main spokesman, navy lieutenant Antonio Trillanes, comes from a military family and like the others involved, was a graduate of the elite Philippine Military Academy. Three of the officers, Captain Gerardo Gambala of the 32nd infantry battalion, Lieutenant Jose Enrico Demetrio Dingle of the Scout Ranger battalion and Lieutenant Laurence San Juan, were all trained by US Special Forces in joint operations on Basilan island in Mindanao last year against the Abu Sayyaf rebels.

In the course of the standoff, the officers circulated copies of the "National Recovery Program" produced by opposition senator and former military officer Gregorio Honasan, who instigated several coup attempts against president Aquino in the late 1980s. The document is a rightwing populist program, which calls for "a national leader who possesses a strong political will" to reform the police and military "to make them effective weapons of the government to defeat crime and insurgency".

The program also makes an appeal to workers, small farmers and the poor who have been hard hit by the economic restructuring measures that have continued under Arroyo. It calls for government to "moderate the pace of globalisation" in order to address growing levels of unemployment, factory closures and declining agricultural output. Honasan, who launched his program in May, is a possible candidate in next year's presidential elections.

Despite the limited scale of the rebellion, Arroyo has moved cautiously against the mutineers. On Tuesday, military intelligence arrested Trillanes and four of the other officers involved. According to Arroyo, they will face courts

martial. Trillanes complained in a radio interview shortly before his arrest that this was contrary to the agreement worked out when the rebels surrendered.

Arroyo has accused Honasan and supporters of previous president Joseph Estrada of having engineered the “coup”. Honasan has admitted to having discussions with some of the officers but denied supporting the rebellion. Police have used emergency powers granted by Arroyo to arrest Ramon Cardenas, a member of Estrada’s cabinet, who has been accused of owning a safe house used by the rebels to store rifles and ammunition.

Arroyo is, however, heavily dependent on the military and cannot afford to alienate the officer corps. While she has denounced the mutineers for staging an illegitimate coup attempt, Arroyo herself came to office by ousting the elected president Estrada in January 2001 with the backing of the military, sections of big business and the judiciary. Her insertion as president followed a campaign of largely middle class protests against Estrada’s alleged corruption.

Arroyo clearly wants to avoid falling victim to a similar move. Along with the arrests, she announced in her State of the Union address on Monday that an independent commission would be established to investigate the allegations of the junior officers. Yesterday, Brigadier General Victor Corpus resigned as military intelligence chief in a bid to defuse anger in the ranks of the military. “In chess, when a queen is beleaguered, it is sometimes necessary to sacrifice a knight to save the game,” he told the media.

Crucial to Arroyo’s ability to put down the revolt was the political support provided by Washington. US State Department spokeswoman Joanne Moore made a formal statement, declaring: “No one should be under any doubt that we fully support the legitimate government... Let there be no mistake that a military coup would have immediate negative consequences, including consequences on the bilateral relationship.”

Arroyo has made her support for the Bush administration’s “global war on terrorism,” including the dispatch of US troops to the southern Philippines to assist in operations against the Abu Sayyaf separatist guerillas, central to her government’s program. Her administration has signed a series of military agreements with the US and agreed to send troops to Iraq as part of the US occupation. Arroyo has been feted in Washington and handed large amounts of US economic and military aid. She will get a further political boost when President Bush visits the Philippines later in the year.

There is no overt opposition in ruling circles in Manila to Arroyo’s enlistment in the “war on terrorism”. If anything,

the demands of the rebel soldiers are critical of her administration for not making the army an effective enough tool for these ends. But there is a degree of disgruntlement over the limited nature of the US economic payoff for the loyalty of the Philippines.

Honasan’s call for the “pace of globalisation” to be moderated was echoed by Fidel Ramos, former Philippines military chief, defence minister and president, in comments to the *New York Times* on July 20. The article entitled “The Rigged Trade Game” explained how the Philippines “got taken” when it joined the World Trade Organisation in 1995. Instead of gaining greater access to agricultural markets, the Philippines, like other Asian and African countries, lost out to heavily-subsidised US and European farmers.

Ramos told the newspaper that “hidden farm subsidies and other tricks” were creating an impossible economic and social situation in the Philippines. “Poor countries cannot afford to be on the short end of this deal for long. People are in real need. People are dying.” Since 1995, hundreds of thousands of farm jobs have been destroyed in the Philippines and the small agricultural surpluses of the early 1990s have been replaced by deficits. Ramos, who is a key supporter of Arroyo, is, as the newspaper explained, “Washington’s staunch ally”.

Honasan and Ramos, each for their own purposes, are pointing to the explosive social tensions building up in the Philippines. Like Estrada and Ramos himself, Arroyo has been committed to implementing the restructuring demands of the IMF and World Bank. She slashed the budget deficit by one third this year after a record blowout in 2002—a measure that further undermined the country’s already limited social programs. The official unemployment rate remains near the high of 17.2 per cent in 2001.

Whereas Ramos is issuing a warning to Washington, Honasan is obviously seeking to make political capital out of the growing discontent with the Arroyo administration. He and others like him clearly have the support of sections of the ruling elite that regard “a national leader with a strong political will” and tougher law-and-order measures as the means for maintaining political stability. It is a recipe for further volatility in the lead up to next year’s elections.



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