

Philippine election reveals widespread political alienation

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10 May 2004

Filipinos go to the polls today to vote for the next president as well as more than 17,000 positions at the local, provincial and national level, including the House of Representatives and half of the Senate posts. The election takes place amid acute social and political tensions, produced by deteriorating economic conditions and attacks on basic democratic rights.

In the latest polls, President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo appears to have a slight lead over her main rival, millionaire film star Fernando Poe Jr, of 37 percent to 31 percent. But at least 12 percent of the electorate is undecided and another 12 percent indicated that they might change their vote. The other presidential candidates—former Senator Raul Roco, ex-national police chief Panfilo Lacson and Christian evangelist Eddie Villanueva—have little support.

The fact that Poe, or “FPJ” as he is known to his supporters, is able to challenge Arroyo is testimony to the broad disaffection, particularly among the poorest layers of the population, with the president and the entire political establishment. Poe, a film star who specialised in appearing as the hero of the downtrodden, has no experience in political office and virtually no policies. While he has the backing of sections of the ruling elite associated with former military dictator Ferdinand Marcos, he also has no political party.

Those backing Poe have attempted to make the 2004 election a rerun of the 1998 election when Joseph Estrada, also an action-hero film star, won the presidency by making populist appeals to the poor. Like Estrada, Poe has been able to capitalise on the hostility generated by the impact of the economic restructuring measures imposed by the incumbent administration.

There is also considerable popular anger over the manner in which Arroyo ousted Estrada and her slavish support for the Bush administration, including the ongoing US military occupation of Iraq and intervention in Afghanistan. At home, she has enacted harsh new “anti-terror” measures and stepped-up attacks on democratic rights. In the lead up to the poll, Arroyo has attempted to whip up a climate of fear with warnings about terrorism and the arrest of “terrorist” suspects. Some 3,000 troops have been mobilised on polling day to patrol the streets of Manila.

Under the country’s constitution, the president can only serve

a single term. Arroyo is only able to run for a second term because of the anti-democratic way she was installed. Having won the vice-presidency in 1998, she was inserted as president in January 2001 in what amounted to a coup, backed by sections of business, the state apparatus, the courts and the military.

In late 2000, Estrada became embroiled in a series of corruption scandals. After a drawn-out process of impeachment failed, Arroyo and her supporters, including former presidents Cory Aquino and Fidel Ramos, mounted a campaign of protests to demand Estrada’s removal. These largely middle-class demonstrations were given a thin “progressive” veneer by the support of various “left” parties and organisations, including the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP).

As the “peoples power” protests mounted, the military stepped in to announce their support for Arroyo and the country’s Supreme Court gave its legal blessing to her blatantly unconstitutional installation as president. Estrada was eventually detained and put on trial but he is yet to be convicted of any corruption charges. He is currently being held in a military compound, Camp Capinpin.

While the pretext for removing Estrada was corruption, the real concerns in the ruling elite were his administration’s failure to implement economic reforms. His image as “a champion of the poor” was wearing thin and his limited attempts at restructuring had started to generate popular opposition. There was also resentment over his open favoritism towards former Marcos business cronies and the exclusion of some well-connected families from government circles.

As soon as she assumed office, Arroyo—a Harvard-trained economist and scion of the Philippine ruling class, rapidly shed any progressive pretensions. Her lack of support among the poor quickly became evident as large demonstrations erupted in April and May 2001 following the arrest of Estrada and led to sharp clashes with the police and military. While opposition politicians had a hand in them, the protests were as much anti-Arroyo, as pro-Estrada. With the backing of the military, Arroyo responded by declaring a “state of rebellion” and rounding up key opposition figures.

From the outset, Arroyo sought the support of the US to shore up her shaky hold on power. She immediately saw the

September 11 attacks on the US as an opportunity to cement closer ties with the Bush administration. The president visited Washington in November 2001 and returned with a package of more than \$4.6 billion in financial assistance as well as investment pledges. In return, she has been one of the foremost advocates of the so-called war on terrorism within the South East Asian region.

Despite opposition in her own administration, Arroyo agreed to the dispatch of US troops to the south of the country to combat the armed Islamic separatist group, Abu Sayyaf. The US troops ostensibly functioned as “trainers” to circumvent the constitution, which prohibits operations by foreign troops on Philippine soil. The step reinforced her ties with the Philippine military, which was keen to reestablish close ties to the US and to receive US technical aid and supplies. Under Arroyo, Manila signed a pact with Washington to allow the US military to establish storage and support services in the Philippines.

At the same time, Arroyo has, despite Congressional opposition, pressed ahead with the IMF’s program of market reforms. She has pushed through unpopular measures that have resulted in sharp increases in electricity and water rates, and in 2003 reduced the budget deficit for the first time in five years.

Arroyo’s policies have produced growing resentment, including among sections of the military. In July 2003, some 300 junior officers and soldiers staged a short-lived mutiny in central Manila to highlight their grievances over corruption in the military. They also circulated copies of a rightwing populist program that called for “a national leader” with a “strong political will” to deal with crime, insurgency and to “moderate the pace of globalisation.” Arroyo quickly put down the revolt with the backing of the military top brass.

Arroyo was so unpopular that in December 2002 she melodramatically announced that she would not be running for another term of office and would use the remainder of the term to concentrate on ending the country’s economic crisis. She only reversed her decision last October.

It was only in these conditions that the Poe campaign was able to win any popular support. Like Estrada, Poe is a rightwing populist with close connections to the Marcos family and its business cronies. As part of his campaign, Poe visited the tomb of the former dictator and obtained the endorsement of his widow Imelda Marcos. In what is an indictment of the so-called democrats who followed Marcos, Poe appears to have gained some support by appealing to nostalgia for the seeming economic and political stability of the Marcos era.

Over the last decade, particularly since the 1997-98 Asian financial crisis, the social conditions of working people have deteriorated markedly. About 40 percent of the population live below the official poverty line and eight out of 10 Filipinos live on \$US2 a day or less. One in three children are under nourished. The official unemployment rate is 11 percent—one of the highest in Asia.

For most of the campaign, Arroyo has been trailing behind

Poe in the polls. She was only able to claw back his lead last month. Crucial to this reversal has been the backing of key sections of big business in Manila. Though critical of Arroyo for not going far enough in implementing market reforms, corporate leaders are concerned that Poe would be a disaster. Poe’s comments in March vaguely calling for a restructuring of the country’s debt provoked a sharp fall in the peso and were immediately criticised by the central bank.

Business endorsement for Arroyo has not been overwhelming, however. Manila economic analyst Alex Pomento commented recently: “Arroyo’s last three years are a story of missed opportunities. The election could give her the mandate to focus on reforms to pull the country out of its mess.” A vote by the influential Manila Makati Business Club, which includes 800 executives from the country’s major corporations, gave Arroyo just 47 percent as the preferred president. Poe received none.

Corporate leaders and foreign investors are demanding an end to the continuing large budget deficits, which are adding to mounting debt. At present, 38 percent of government revenue is used for debt repayment—up from 22 percent in 1999. Declining foreign investment has hit the economy hard. Investment in fixed assets and factories fell 45 percent in the first nine months of 2003 and by a quarter in 2002 and 2001.

In order to secure the support of big business, Arroyo has promised to balance the budget by 2009. But to do so, her administration will have to implement measures that directly impact on the living standards of the poor. The IMF has called for increased taxes including on cigarettes, alcohol and petroleum products and higher electricity tariffs.

To wind back Poe’s lead, Arroyo has had to pull out all stops. As a vice-presidential running mate, she chose a television news anchor, Noli De Castro, who has a broad following. His job along with a small army of political consultants has been to try to put a populist gloss on Arroyo and her unpalatable policies. At the same time, the president has not hesitated to use government money to promote her campaign. Government billboards and newspaper advertisements have praised her term in office and some 150,000 road sweepers have been hired with t-shirts that read “Work provided by GMA.”

Whether these measures are enough to ensure Arroyo’s victory remains to be seen. None of the candidates, however, have any fundamental differences with her political and economic agenda. Whoever wins, the next administration is certain to step up the attacks on the social position of the working class and rural poor.



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