

Philippine president imposes state of emergency after alleged coup attempt

Peter Symonds
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In a sign of considerable political crisis, Philippine President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo last Friday declared a state of emergency and began a crackdown on political opponents in response to what she alleged was a foiled military coup.

In a taped speech broadcast on national television, Arroyo declared that there had been a conspiracy between right-wing “military adventurers” and “Communists” that was “a clear threat to the nation”. She warned those who threatened the government that “the whole weight of the law will fall on your treason”.

Few details of the coup attempt have been made public. Some 14 junior military officers were detained and Brigadier General Danilo Lim, head of the elite Scout Rangers, and Colonel Ariel Querubin, commander of the First Marine Brigade, were relieved of their commands. In a show of strength, the army placed shipping containers, barbed wire and armed vehicles on the approaches to the presidential palace.

It appears that the rebel officers and their troops planned to take part in anti-Arroyo rallies on Friday and Saturday coinciding with the anniversary of the so-called Peoples Power movement that toppled the Marcos dictatorship in 1986. Rumours of such a military protest had been circulating in the capital of Manila for days.

In any event, the rebellion had already been crushed before the state of emergency was declared. Whatever the exact extent of the threat to her administration, the president has clearly exploited the “coup” to intimidate and in some cases arrest her opponents. Her decree accused the opposition not so much of preparing to overthrow the administration but of “obstructing governance” “hindering the growth of the economy:” and “sabotaging the people’s confidence in government”.

Despite a complete ban on all protests and rallies, around 5,000 protesters led by former President Corazon Aquino marched through the Makita business district in central Manila on Friday afternoon. Police broke up the protesters using batons and water cannon and arrested several dozen people.

The round-up continued over the weekend. In the early hours of Saturday morning, police raided the offices of the English-language *Daily Tribune* and prevented some copies of the newspaper from being distributed. The newspaper, which has been bitterly critical of Arroyo, declared: “The stench of martial law has pervaded the entire country.”

Also on Saturday, police arrested leftist Bayan Muna Congressman Crispin Beltran and retired general Ramon Montano, claiming they were “part of a conspiracy to commit rebellion.” However, the charge against Beltran dated back to 1985—that is, during the Marcos dictatorship. ABS-CBN television stated that police had a list of 100 people to be arrested.

On Sunday, dozens of protesters gathered outside a Marine base in central Manila amid claims that 100 marines were protesting against the removal of their commander Major General Renato Miranda from his post. Riot police were called in to disperse the demonstrators—several nuns as well as members of various left-wing groups.

The events of the last three days reveal that the sharp divisions in ruling circles that led to concerted efforts last year to impeach President Arroyo have not ended. Arroyo was embroiled for months in allegations that she tampered with the 2004 presidential election result and charges that her husband and son were involved in taking bribes from illegal gambling operators.

A motley collection of opponents ranging from right-wing supporters of ousted President Joseph Estrada to

various left-wing and Stalinist parties were seeking to capitalise on mounting popular hostility to Arroyo's program of market reforms and her anti-democratic methods. Anti-Arroyo protests, however, remained comparatively small. Despite some defections, Arroyo retained her majority in Congress and was able to formally squash impeachment proceedings in September.

The lack of substantial protests did not signal positive support for Arroyo. Polling showed that more than 80 percent of the population supported her impeachment. Moreover, there was widespread opposition to rising prices, high levels of unemployment and Arroyo's plans to increase VAT taxes. If large numbers did not take part in the political rallies, it was because the majority of the population had no confidence in any section of the political establishment—Arroyo or her opponents.

The alienation is understandable. The last "Peoples Power" campaign in January 2001 ousted Estrada, the elected president, on trumped up charges of corruption, and installed Arroyo. Former President Aquino, who now calls on Arroyo to make the "supreme sacrifice" and step down, was in the forefront of the campaign by sections of business, the Roman Catholic Church, the military and state apparatus to replace Estrada.

As Arroyo's popularity has waned, divisions in ruling circles have again emerged amid continuing economic fragility and uncertainty. Arroyo was only finally able to raise the VAT tax from 10 percent to 12 percent on February 1 after court challenges and protests. She is also seeking to press ahead with other economic reforms to cut the substantial budget deficit and attract much needed foreign investment.

Her decision to impose a state of emergency has provoked considerable criticism from layers of the ruling elite who are concerned that it is an overreaction that will lead to even greater political instability. The peso and the stockmarket both dropped 1 percent last Friday on the news.

Erin Prelypchan, an analyst at Pacific Strategies Assessment, dismissed the alleged coup as "more theatre than threat". She said the "supposed coup" was "just in the planning stages, there was no set date," adding that "the government basically timed it to say no one is going to try anything today."

Business consultant Peter Wallace told the British-

based *Financial Times* that declaring a state of emergency was "taking it too far" given that the government said it had quelled the plot. "It sends a signal that the government is not really in control," he said. "Investors will just go to Malaysia or Vietnam, where these kinds of uncertainties don't exist."

However, the most significant comments came from key powerbroker Fidel Ramos, former armed forces chief, who was instrumental in installing Aquino as president in 1986 before subsequently taking over the post himself. Last year, unlike Aquino, he continued to back Arroyo and was influential in preventing her impeachment.

In a press conference on Saturday, Ramos was sharply critical of Arroyo's actions, particularly the arrest of opponents and media controls. "In fact, I was appalled when I heard about it and I was dismayed. It's Marcosian, the arrests and the presidential proclamation itself.

Ramos expressed concern at the economic consequences. "We are unduly panicking to the discredit of our credit ratings, the peso fell 52 centavos yesterday. I hope it will not fall anymore but as long as that state of emergency is there, this place will be avoided by our foreign friends," he declared.

Ramos pointedly described his support for Arroyo as "waning"—a comment that must have triggered alarm bells in the Arroyo administration. While the state of emergency is still in place, police appear to have backed away from taking harsher measures against the political opposition. The *Daily Tribune* was permitted to publish yesterday without interference.

Whether the political crisis blows over or intensifies in coming days is not possible to determine. Whatever the immediate outcome, however, the underlying issues that have led to the sharp tensions will not subside and can only lead to further political eruptions.



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