

Political tensions continue after Philippine state of emergency ends

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Philippines President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo has ended the country's state of emergency one week after she imposed it. The decree was lifted on March 3, but still without any credible evidence of any alleged coup attempt involving, allegedly, a combination of Communists and right-wing army officers.

The immediate purpose of Arroyo's decree was to forestall planned anti-government protests on February 28, coinciding with the anniversary of the so-called "Peoples Power" overthrow of the Marcos dictatorship in 1986. Under the state of emergency, the administration was given draconian powers to arrest without warrant, ban rallies and crack down on the media.

Despite the ban on protests, former president Corazon Aquino led a 5,000-strong demonstration and called for Arroyo to resign. Aquino's involvement with moves to remove Arroyo is a sign of deep rifts in ruling circles in Manila. In 2001, Aquino was a key supporter of moves that ousted elected president Joseph Estrada and installed Arroyo in what was hailed as another "Peoples Power" movement.

Behind the conflict are sharp differences over changes to the country's constitution. The proposal to amend the constitution emerged last year amid a deep crisis of the presidency, which was besieged for months over election rigging allegations and accusations of corruption involving Arroyo's family.

As a campaign to impeach Arroyo gathered pace, one of her key backers, former president and military chief Fidel Ramos, proposed to transform the government from a presidential to a parliamentary system. A prime minister chosen by parliament would head the government while the presidency would be reduced to a secondary role. Ramos put forward the plan both as an alternative to the impeachment proceedings and as a solution to the country's continual plunge into political crisis.

Arroyo seized on the proposal as a means of salvaging her administration. Last August she appointed a 55-member Consultative Commission to draft proposals to amend the 1987 constitution. In December, the commission presented a

121-page report, which precipitated acrimonious debate in the House of Representatives and Senate.

Under the Commission's plan, the 2007 elections for the House of Representatives and half the Senate as well as local government were to be cancelled. The existing elected officials would form a transitional government in which Arroyo would remain head of state and government but share power with a prime minister until the new arrangement was fully established through fresh elections in May 2010. The Commission proposed that the transitional arrangement would start in June and the new constitution be endorsed this year.

A chorus of opposition erupted over the proposed cancellation of the 2007 elections. Those who had been pushing for Arroyo's impeachment last year accused her of using the constitutional changes to entrench herself in power and of adopting the dictatorial methods of Marcos. Although the key proponent of a parliamentary form of rule, Ramos, concerned at the reemergence of tensions, described the move as a "monumental blunder".

In a bid to defuse the opposition, the Council of State, a presidential advisory body, met on January 24 and decided to go ahead with the 2007 elections while proceeding to establish parliamentary rule. However, Aquino and the opposition parties boycotted the meeting and renewed the agitation for Arroyo to step down. Seven members of Arroyo's hand-picked Commission voted against the report.

Just as significant as the changes to the political system were amendments to the constitution to allow non-Filipinos to own land, advertising firms and the media, schools and public utilities.

For sections of the ruling class who continue to support Arroyo for her limited efforts to implement IMF "reforms", the easing of such restrictions is viewed as essential to attract much needed investment. In the mining and mineral sectors, for instance, the country is missing out on potential investment and exports because foreign mining corporations are not permitted to own land.

There is no consensus, however. More uncompetitive

layers of business and major landowners fear that the removal of the current constitutional restrictions will undermine their economic and political power. Aquino, who presided over the drawing up of the 1987 post-Marcos constitution, also opposed previous attempts by ousted president Estrada to make similar amendments to the foreign ownership clauses.

All the indications are that Arroyo declared the state of emergency as a means of intimidating her opposition and strengthening her own weak political position. Certainly Arroyo's allegations that a coup was underway have not been substantiated. The only action planned by any military unit appears to have been by Marine Brigade Commander Colonel Ariel Querubin who allegedly was planning to participate along with his men in the anti-government protests led by Aquino.

Even this alleged "plot" was more of an expression of discontent in military ranks over their treatment under the Arroyo administration. An article in the *International Herald Tribune* on March 3 noted widespread resentment over Arroyo's cultivation of top generals, while the lower ranks are badly treated, ill-equipped and poorly led and bear the brunt of the fighting against Islamic separatists in southern Mindanao.

Following the lifting of the state of emergency, Arroyo's press secretary Ignacio Bunye acknowledged the discontent and appealed to the armed forces. "In the military, we have started the procurement reforms, capability enhancements, and review of the benefits to soldiers," he said. "But maybe we should strengthen the system of hearing the grievances from soldiers and give immediate action to their complaints."

However, the government continued to assert that a major coup had been underway. Military spokesman Major Bartolome Baccaro made the unlikely claim that members of the Maoist New Peoples Army (NPA) had infiltrated Manila as part of their alliance with right-wing military rebels to topple Arroyo. NPA spokesman Gregorio Rosal dismissed the statement, saying that the NPA was continuing its strategy of its so-called "protracted peoples war" in the countryside.

Under the state of emergency, a number of Arroyo's opponents were detained. Leftist Congressman Crispin Beltran has been charged with rebellion, not because of any involvement in moves against Arroyo, but based on a warrant issued 21 years ago under Marcos. Police are seeking at least 16 more oppositionists. Five have reportedly taken refuge in the Congress.

Measures against the media have continued after the emergency ended. Under the pretext of dealing with what presidential spokesman Bunye described as a "residual

threat", the police have charged *Daily Tribune* editor-in-chief Ninez Cacho-Olivares and journalists Herman Tiu Laurel and Ike Serieres with incitement to sedition. Justice Secretary Raul Gonzales ominously announced that the government is watching seven more journalists.

National Union of Journalists chairman Jose Torres described the prosecutions as "pure and simple harassment of the media and a direct assault on freedom of the press and speech." He suggested the government should be making a greater effort to investigate the "numerous" unsolved murders that had made the Philippines the second most dangerous country in the world for reporters after Iraq.

The attacks on democratic rights have provoked opposition. The Supreme Court currently has seven petitions from lawmakers and the Bar Association calling for the emergency decree itself to be declared unconstitutional. The Senate has set up two committees to investigate the constitutionality of the government's actions, including the arrests without warrants, the cancellation of rallies and the attacks on freedom of the press, including a police raid on the *Daily Tribune* offices.

Among masses of ordinary working people, Arroyo is deeply unpopular. Polls during last year's crisis found that an overwhelming majority thought that the president should be impeached. Her pro-IMF policies of fiscal austerity and privatisation are resented. The increase in the value added tax (VAT) from 10 to 12 percent on February 1 combined with high oil prices has led to protests over high prices. A recent survey by the Social Weather Stations polling group found 17 percent of the 85 million population suffered from hunger.

Under these conditions, the ruling elites, including Arroyo's close supporters, are becoming increasingly nervous about her ability to manage the economy, slash budget spending and attract foreign investment as well as to contain the resulting opposition and discontent. Far from resolving any of the deep-seated social and political tensions, the imposition of a state of emergency has only exacerbated the crisis and could well presage the resort to more dictatorial forms of rule.



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