Philippines election result indicates deep hostility to Arroyo government

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More than seven weeks after the May 14 national elections in the Philippines, results are still to be finalised amid accusations of corruption and legal challenges. President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo was not facing election, but the results to date have revealed, albeit in a distorted form, continuing widespread popular opposition to her administration and its policies.

Arroyo initially came to power in early 2001 after elected president Joseph Estrada was ousted on trumped-up charges of corruption in what amounted to a virtual coup backed by the military, sections of big business and the state apparatus. Although she won the 2004 presidential elections, Arroyo confronted two impeachment attempts in 2005 and 2006 over alleged vote rigging and corruption charges against her husband and other family members.

For Arroyo and her supporters, one of the main objectives in this year's election was to block any new attempt to remove the president. Her political allies won 90 percent of the 219 district seats in the 275-seat House of Representatives, where the support of one-third of the members is required to initiate impeachment proceedings. Arroyo supporters also won an overwhelming majority of the provincial governorships and mayoral positions at stake in the elections.

On the basis of the lower house vote, Arroyo claimed that she had been vindicated. However, the Philippines is notorious for "money politics," political patronage, outright election fraud and political violence, particularly at the district and local level. Arroyo, who has exploited her position as president to consolidate backing at the provincial and local levels, pulled out all stops to ensure domination in the House of Representatives. Officially, 117 people died in 227 incidents of election-related violence during the campaign. The actual figure is likely to be considerably higher.

In the contest for the Senate, Arroyo's backers, grouped as "Team Unity," suffered a major setback, winning only 2 of the 11 seats decided so far and losing control of the upper house. Even the two successful Team Unity candidates are not closely associated with Arroyo and have previously been critical of her policies. Of the remaining seats, seven were won by the "Genuine Opposition" grouping of Arroyo opponents and two by independents. The remaining closely fought seat is yet to be finalised.

The Genuine Opposition—an alliance of right-wing candidates, some with close connections to the ousted president Estrada—capitalised on the widespread hostility to the Arroyo administration by denouncing her alleged corruption. One was former lower house member Peter Cayetano, who was prominent in the two failed attempts to impeach Arroyo. Another was former national police chief Panfilo Lacson, who persistently denounced Arroyo and her husband for illegally amassing personal wealth.

In one of the more bizarre outcomes, Antonio Trillanes, a junior army officer who led an unsuccessful anti-Arroyo mutiny in July 2003, won the 11th Senate seat, running on the Genuine Opposition ticket. Trillanes, who is still being held in military detention, was temporarily released on June 15 so he could be sworn in. He told reporters that he would back Senate inquiries into the Arroyo administration's corruption and a wave of extra-judicial killings. "If we want to serve the country, we have to get rid of Gloria Arroyo," he said.

Trillanes's win is a clear sign that voters were looking for a means to register a protest against Arroyo. While denouncing the administration for corruption, however, the Genuine Opposition team has no fundamental differences with Arroyo's economic and social policies or her attacks on basic democratic rights. The Genuine Opposition and Team Unity simply represent competing factions of the country's ruling elites, which have jointly presided over deepening social inequality and growing

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levels of poverty and unemployment.

Arroyo, a Harvard-trained economist, has pursued a program of "economic reforms" designed to open up the economy to large-scale domestic and foreign capital. The Philippines had been slower than most South East Asian economies to recover from the 1997-98 Asian economic crisis, lagging behind regional competitors in attracting foreign investment. Annual growth rates have averaged a modest 5 percent since 2003, but jumped to an annualised 6.9 percent in the first quarter of 2007.

Arroyo latched onto the latest growth figures and recent investment as proof that her program was working. During her term of office, she has implemented IMF/World Bank-backed policies, including cutbacks to public spending, an increase in the Value Added Tax (VAT) and deregulation of the energy sector. Her administration is also pressing for constitutional changes to end restrictions on foreign ownership of land and involvement in the mining sector.

Like previous attempts to make similar constitutional changes, Arroyo's proposals have provoked opposition across the political spectrum, including from so-called left parties, such as the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP), which has denounced attempts to change the constitution's "patriotic provisions". This line-up is not to defend the interests of working people, but less-competitive sections of Philippine business. While they now denounce Arroyo's economic policies and autocratic methods, the CPP and other left groups played a crucial role in ousting Estrada and backing her installation in 2001.

Arroyo's economic policies have led to rising prices and unemployment, hitting the country's rural and urban poor. Estimates of those living below the poverty line vary between 25 and 40 percent of the population. Social inequality is widening. According to the official 2003 Family Income and Expenditure Survey, the richest 20 percent of the population receives 53 percent of the total national income, while the bottom 20 percent gets only 4.6 percent.

To deal with growing discontent, the Arroyo administration has resorted to increasingly anti-democratic methods. Arroyo immediately backed the Bush administration's bogus "war on terror" after September 11 and used similar rhetoric to step up the civil war against Islamic separatist groups in Mindanao and CPP guerrillas. There has been a growing domestic and international outcry over the murder of an estimated 800 left-wing activists, agrarian reformers and journalists since Arroyo came to office.

The president was compelled to appoint an inquiry headed by former Supreme Court judge Jose Melo to examine the alleged involvement of the security forces in the assassinations. The Melo report, handed down in January, confirmed that the army and police were involved and that the military routinely branded any group pressing for reform as "communist" to legitimise repression. The report nevertheless whitewashed the government and the military, declaring the murders were the work of "rogue elements," not state policy.

During the election, Arroyo was particularly concerned her opponents might win a significant majority of the 55 party list seats for the House of Representatives. Like the Senate, lower house party-list seats are allocated by the national aggregate vote and are therefore less susceptible to local electoral abuses. The Arroyo camp set up at least 11 front parties in a bid to confuse voters, divide the opposition vote and maximise the number of pro-government legislators. According to the *Philippine Star*, General Rodolfo Obaniana, head of the Eastern Mindanao Command, had been "vigorously campaigning against party-list organisations supportive of the communist movement".

Arroyo is pressing ahead with the implementation of a "Human Security Act" which in the name of "fighting terrorism" allows for any suspect to be detained without warrant or charge for thee days, the accessing of bank accounts and jail sentences of up to 40 years for terrorist offenses. So widespread was the belief that the new legislation would be used by the security forces to target political opponents that Arroyo had to agree that the law would be suspended before and after any election.

By ensuring her supporters control the lower house, Arroyo has staved off any immediate impeachment challenge. Far from establishing political stability, however, the president has simply ensured that the widespread opposition to her administration will erupt in more unpredictable and explosive ways.

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