



THE PHILIPPINES: FRAGILE DEMOCRACY OR STRONG REPUBLIC?

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This is the edited version of a talk which he gave to the Society on 7 December 2005.

The *sampaguita*, the tropical jasmine, is the Philippine national flower, traditionally strung in a lei and draped around the guest's neck as a welcome. Folklore has it that the young princess pledged fidelity to the nobleman as he set off to defend her kingdom with the words "*sumpa kita*" (I promise you). He never returned. She died of a broken heart and where she was buried a vine grew with sweet-scented blooms named *sampaguita*, echoing her promise. A charming story that might prompt a comparison of the fragile promise of Philippine democracy with the resilience long displayed by a republic of 85 million people. A useful first step is to examine the problems which face today's President. These can very roughly be divided into the legacy of the past and the challenges of the present. Some are both.

Geography

A first factor to take into account is geography. The archipelago has 7,107 islands, of which some 1,000 are populated. The major airline flies regularly to 18 destinations south of Manila and just two north. Much intra-island communication is by ferry or small boat. Tawi Tawi is some 1,200 km from Manila. Over recent decades, investment in the transportation infrastructure has been low compared with that in many South-East Asian neighbours. While electronic communications now help, until recently the means of government and business communication has been cumbersome and uncertain, even when not affected by natural phenomena like typhoons, earthquakes and volcanic eruptions.

Diversity

A further key element is the ethnic diversity bequeathed by the past. It was not for nothing that the great Jesuit scholar de la Costa told his countrymen 30 years

ago to recognize the identikit of a nation of Malay stock, socially structured on an Indonesian pattern, recipient of a large infusion of Chinese blood and attitudes, yet with a cultural heritage in part Spanish and in part Anglo-Saxon.¹

The early history of the Philippines is one of successive foreign arrivals: first the aboriginal Negritos who came as settlers; then the Austronesian seafarers; then the Malays, who developed the lowland culture; the seafaring Sama, who today make up 80 percent of the population of the Tawi Tawi archipelagic Province, itself of 307 islands; the Chinese, who traded on Luzon from the 13th century and established settlements around Manila from the 14th century; and, of course, Islam, whose first Mosque was built in Tawi Tawi in 1380 (the historic pillars are still there). The ethnographic legacy is clear: in 1942 the Smithsonian was able to identify 19 language groups on Luzon, four in the Visayas, three in Mindoro and Palawan and 16 in Mindanao and Sulu, a total of 39. Writing later, David Steinberg referred to the fragmentation of the upland and lowland groups with as many as 70 languages, although 90 percent of the population used only nine: Tagalog, Cebuano (Bisaya), Ilocano, Hiligaynon, Bicol, Wanay, Pampango, Pangasinan and Maranao.² Whatever the number, over the centuries the rugged, mountainous terrain and transportation difficulties isolated many of the ethnic groups. There were also different syllabaries before the adoption of the Roman script: when we visited the Tagbanua of Palawan we found their script still in use today. While fundamentally most of these languages have their grammatical roots in what philologists call Indonesian, allowing acculturation if the effort is made, there remains considerable mutual incomprehension and many of the main tongues have their own regional newspapers and magazines. National political leaders must defer to the local culture when they are on the stump.

Legacy of Spain

But an equally important influence comes from more than three centuries of Spanish rule. In 1521, Ferdinand Magellan, the Portuguese explorer sponsored by Spain, was killed by Chief Lapu Lapu on Mactan before his men went on to complete the circumnavigation. In 1543, the Leyte-Samar islands were named Filipinas in honour of the future King Felipe II of Spain. And by 1565 Legaspi, the Spanish conquistador, claimed the archipelago as Spanish after his defeat of the Muslim Chief of Maynilad (now Manila), Rajah Sulayman, establishing a Spanish colony which lasted effectively until 1899.

There were hiccups. Warring with Spain, the Dutch harassed Manila at points in the 17th century. And, as part of the English-French-Spanish War, the British occupied Manila briefly, from 1762 to 1764. Incidentally, Sepoys (as the Filipinos term them) seem to have participated in the British occupation, an element much taken up by Filipino artists in particular: Anita Magsaysay-Ho depicted the British Army Sepoys arriving in Taytay;³ and Manny Baldemor, another vibrant artist who also studied Stonehenge, has a nice story from his grandmother about Sepoys putting children into sacks filled with concrete for

bridge foundations as a warning against going out of the home after lunch.⁴ The Chinese in Manila supported the British but in 1764, when the Seven Years War ended, the Treaty of Paris returned Manila to Spain. There is a point to observe about the long Spanish period. It has been estimated that the proportion of Spaniards in the Philippines was never more than one percent, compared to some 30 percent in Spanish America. Spanish never became the principal language and, interestingly, the first Synod in 1582 determined that Christianity be taught not in Spanish, but in the vernacular languages.

American influence

Then there is the American period. In 1901, after the Philippine-American war, William Taft, later to become President, became civilian Governor-General, succeeding Arthur Macarthur, whose son Douglas was then at West Point. Taft's task as both Governor and subsequently as President was to implant the foundations of a modern State. By 1903, the 70,000 American troops had reduced to 15,000, but a civilian community of some 5,000 had emerged, notably civil servants, but also businessmen and those involved with private institutions like the YMCA and the Boy Scouts.⁵ National elections were held in 1907, bringing the foundation of the Assembly as the first freely elected legislature in Asia. But the adoption of such practice was far from smooth. The tenets of political democracy naturally clashed with much of the legacy of both the old Malay and Spanish value systems. Economic democracy also brought confrontation with the wealthy class of Filipinos, and the introduction of democratic behaviour in schools was another innovation. In 1930, 30 years after the American occupation of Manila, Carlos P. Romulo, who later became the first Asian President of the United Nations, wrote that after the Philippine-American War the Philippines had died and then was reborn as a democracy (over a generation 'too short to determine whether we bear that stamp to our honour or our shame'). De la Costa also commented many years ago that during the US stewardship the trappings of stable government along the lines of American democratic institutions were implanted without much account being taken of social and historical difference. Democracy, he said, had survived as a form and was rugged, but the economic and social infrastructure was lacking. His recipe was for leadership as a public service; for education; and for confidence, without which the ship of state was in T. S. Eliot's words a drifting boat with a slow leakage.⁶

Philippine independence moved closer in 1935, when Quezon was elected President of the Philippine Commonwealth. It was he who later appointed General Macarthur as Marshal of the Philippine Army during the World War II. Macarthur junior returned famously to Leyte in October 1944. The costly Battle for Manila that followed in February 1945 was the only case of American and Japanese armies fighting each other for a city and it left Manila worse damaged by World War II than any other city except Warsaw.

But while many remember 1941 to 1945 as the period of the Japanese irruption and occupation, we should not overlook the fact that the Japanese

involvement in the Philippines had begun much earlier, and in far different circumstances. This had been in what was called the Japanese colony centred on Davao on Mindanao. The story involved a Kobe merchant called Ohta, who in 1904–05 had been a fixer involved in the building by Japanese workers of the Benguet road up to the American hill station of Baguio in Central Luzon, under contract to the Americans. Ohta went on to Davao, still a village then, but opened a store for the growing number of Japanese labourers employed on the American plantations growing *abaca* (hemp). Ohta set up a development company of his own to run an *abaca* plantation. The hemp boom in the World War I stimulated further Japanese investment and by 1916 it is recorded that 10,000 Japanese were in Davao. By 1920, Japanese consular personnel were detached to Davao and by 1932 when the number had grown to 13,000 the region was visited by Governor-General Theodore Roosevelt Jr. By the late 1930s, of course, Philippine suspicion had grown over Japanese expansionism in Asia and Davao came to be called Little Japan or even Davaokuo.⁷ Tourism officials today in Davao tell you of their customers from Japan visiting to see where their grandfathers worked.

Recent history

The end of the War made possible the re-establishment of the Commonwealth and the inauguration in 1946 of President Roxas as the first President of the sovereign Philippines. But, sadly, his inauguration did not usher in the uninterrupted development of a democratic pattern to the present day. The challenge to democracy came after Ferdinand Marcos succeeded President Macapagal, father of the current President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo. Marcos was re-elected in 1969 but in 1972 took the country into a state of martial law. Ninoy Aquino, the leading Opposition figure, was arrested, imprisoned for seven years, spent three in exile in the United States and on his return to Manila in August 1983 was assassinated at the airport. Subsequently, in a muddled election, his widow, Corazon (Cory) Aquino, won the support of among others General Fidel Ramos and became President from 1986 to 1992. She was succeeded by Ramos, who served until 1998 when movie actor “Erap” Estrada won the election with the slogan “*Erap para sa Mahirap*” (Erap for the poor). Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo was his Vice-President and assumed the Presidency in January 2001.

The turbulent period of politics post-war was much intertwined with a succession of insurgency problems. The so-called Huk movement of the People’s Liberation Army (the *Hukbo ng Bayan Laban sa Hapon*, or People’s Army Against the Japanese) turned to subversion in the post-war period and to rebellion by the late 1940s. They were eventually defeated in a campaign led by the then Defence Secretary Magsaysay, later to be President. But conflict was far from over. In the late 1960s, Moro consciousness and Islamic revivalism grew into the political organization of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and paramilitary conflict. By way of background it is fair to point

out that in the early 20th century Moros (from the Spanish word for Moors) made up three-quarters of the population of Mindanao; by 1939 they were just one-third of the much larger population, by 1990 this was down to a fifth. The Spaniards had not colonized the territory but under the US Administration officially sponsored migration took place, and this gained pace after World War II, especially bringing large numbers of Cebuano speakers from the Visayas as Christian settlers. The issue of Moro ancestral lands remains a key one today in the fraught peace process. Fighting had escalated in the 1970s and 1980s, the MNLF pressing for secession for the Muslim areas. Eventually the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) was formed in 1989 and a final peace agreement was reached in September 1996. But the Mindanaoan-led splinter Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) held out for independence and by 1999 fighting started again between the MILF and the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP), escalating to all-out war under Estrada. Abu Sayyaf also emerged as a loose but vicious group of bandits. However secessionist groups in the South were far from the only source of problems for successive Governments in Malacanang Palace. The New People's Army (NPA), guerrilla arm of the Communist Party and successor to the Huks, had grown in strength during Marcos's martial law, to the point that by the end of his Presidency it was a serious military force. David Steinberg points out that, unlike other places of conflict involving a politicized military, in the Philippines there was also a democratically elected and well supported Government. President Aquino faced hostility both from the Army and from the Communists. She endured successive coup attempts. Her husband, in his 'Testament from a Prison Cell', had described the Filipino communist leaders as Leninists wanting to replace the capitalist State with a one-party monopoly.⁸

So much for the complex historical background to the political situation today, to which must be added a further much debated element in Philippine democracy, and probably a major factor over recent years. I refer to People Power which has critically influenced the Philippine State over the last 20 years. People Power I describes the toppling of Marcos and restoration of democracy in 1986. This was EDSA I, referring to the Epifanio de los Santos Shrine when rebellion against Marcos was supported by civilians on the streets in central Manila. People Power or EDSA II, also relatively peaceful, brought about the deposing of Estrada in early 2001; this was described by some as a 'soft coup', others as a 'gentle revolution', perhaps by a few as mob rule. But in May 2001 a violent eruption of Estrada supporters against President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, People Power III, seems to have been of a different character closer to mob rule than democratic rule of law. The stalwart commentator Amando Doronila pinpoints the period between January and May 2001 as when, among other factors, People Power came to look like a threat of "unrestrained recurrence" to bring down a government.⁹ If People Power I and II were middle-class demonstrations, People Power III was more lumpen and Doronila concludes that People Power had shifted from the form supported by the late Jaime, Cardinal Sin and by President Aquino and was more

turbulent. More recently, the strange coup attempt of July 2003, when disaffected military officers took over a residential service block in the heart of Makati, and the election of 2004 were political events of the highest order, but neither attracted great numbers in sustained street demonstrations, so there was no People Power IV. We could be relieved that Philippine democracy seemed a victor.

Continuing insurgency

Another enduring element is insurgency. It is somewhat surprising in 2005 that the troublesome New People's Army and their associates are still in business. Is this really because of their ideology? Or does the familiar stalling of the peace process with them just indicate that their supporters are little more than bandits and extortionists preying on poverty and on ineffective local security? As recently as October 2005, three soldiers were killed after around 30 so-called communist rebels attacked a military detachment in the first such raid in Cebu for some years, a week after another incident in Agusan del Sur. In both cases, motivation seemed to include stealing weapons. And in November 2005 another nine soldiers were killed in an ambush on Iloilo, also in the Visayas. In Mindanao, the ARMM remains the compromise-chosen instrument of autonomy. Many visits to the region convince you beyond doubt of the immense poverty of an area ravaged by long-term violent conflict. The ARMM poverty incidence is 57 percent. The newly elected Governor, Zaldy Ampatuan, said recently that gun possession was still an indispensable part of the Moro culture, sadly replacing the *kris*, the traditional symbol of authority and respect. A pity that the Japanese lesson of giving up the gun in the old samurai culture could not have been applied.

It was in her second State of the Nation address in July 2002 that President Macapagal-Arroyo set the theme of a strong republic that should overcome the pressure of strong minorities and exercise good governance. Her definition of a strong republic was twofold: independence from class and sectoral interests; and strong institutions and bureaucracy to execute good policy and deliver services. The President emphasized service delivery against a long list of measurable targets. She also said that she was determined to break the back of terrorism and crime. Three years including the general election have passed since then. In 2004, Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo won another six years in office after an exhausting campaign and challenge from the late Fernando Poe Junior, the highly popular actor. Poe had won a significant number of votes from the lower socio-economic segments, but GMA won strong support from the Central, Cebuano-speaking Visayas. After the election, GMA focused on the creation of jobs, on education, the infrastructure, the peace process, ending the divisiveness of People Power and balancing the budget. Later in the year, she called for government departments across the board to tackle the corruption in their areas of responsibility.

The economy

The strength of the Philippine Republic has to be seen in the context of the economy, especially its management for the Filipinos' well-being. Early optimism after World War II was based on the twin resources of natural advantage and Philippine talent, plus the American special relationship. But over the decades since, what has come to be called crony capitalism ate away at the structure. Political instability over the decades became a difficult environment for new investment, whether domestic or foreign. Among countries seen to be most prone to conflict, the recently-published Oxford University Press *Human Security Report* puts the Philippines in fourth place in conflict-year terms after Burma, India and Ethiopia (the UK was sixth).¹⁰ How does the economy look now? As most countries, the Philippines depends for much of its economic well-being on the state of the world economy and the regional economy affecting it directly. So higher hydrocarbon prices hurt. As a starting point, the Philippines scores in the medium group on the UN Human Development Index and just ranks as a middle income country at GDP per capita of around \$1,000, under the level where academic study suggests the probability of new conflict reduces significantly. The reality is that in a country of a sustained, very high birth rate there are tens of millions of poor people, undernourished and with poor infrastructure and employment opportunities, a number that annually will increase absolutely without strong and effective macro-economic management.

The current President, who is a trained economist, is therefore well placed to influence the macro economy in the right direction for poverty alleviation. In a recent judgement, the IMF saw Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo's election last year as opening the way to fiscal and structural reform, although this had been interrupted mid-year by political events, notably the resignation of key economic Cabinet members. Real GDP growth has since 2000 averaged around five percent a year, slowing this year with a decline in agricultural production, while industrial production and services increased seven percent. The latest GDP figures show an encouraging 4.8 percent growth, higher than immediate neighbours Malaysia, Thailand and Taiwan, but lower than Indonesia and of course Singapore. The Manila stock market has performed strongly, up 15 percent over the year so far. Unfortunately, inflation has increased to seven percent, driven by the higher imported oil price. The key structural weakness is in the public sector deficit. Government revenue is still down at 15 percent of GDP, from 20 percent in 1997, although the decline has been arrested. Euphemistically, there is a long way to go before the collection of taxes becomes more efficient, although, as noted above, the President has committed herself to a major effort in this context.

No analysis of the Philippine economy should however ignore two other factors, both unusual, both positive. First, the remittance back home of significant amounts of money from the 8 million Filipinos working overseas. The total figure this year may well be around \$13 billion, some 13.5 percent of the domestic GDP and easily the highest proportion of any country with a large

population; additional remittances through non-banking channels would increase the total further. This extraordinary flow of funds is critical for the economy and of course reflects the natural sense of responsibility felt by Filipinos overseas for their loved ones back home. In a way, these overseas workers are the Philippine middle class. Their host countries benefit from their many talents and their families may rely on the remittances as their principal income, certainly their main discretionary income for investment in education, health and consumption. There are for example two million Filipino-Americans, including famously President Bush's chef. I would nevertheless suggest that because this middle class is in Detroit, Riyadh, Belfast and their equivalents there is something missing, in less of the trickle-down effect that would be felt in the domestic economy if they were physically present at home. There is also the particular additional point that the economic benefits of Philippine migration have not reached the poorer parts of the country. The smallest proportion of migrant workers comes from the poorest region, the ARMM. The President's job creation programme is therefore to be lauded.

The second factor stems from the same talent, whether we are talking about nurses, engineers, telecommunications staff, people working in the hotel and restaurant trade, or in software, all English-speaking, the reputation of the heroic Philippine worker is legendary. This was echoed by President Eisenhower in his assessment of the Philippine soldier. In his speech to the Philippine Congress, the current President Bush described American respect for the character of the Philippine nation and for the decency and courage of the Philippine people. My point is actually about a business opportunity for British firms, concerned about their own survival against severe cost pressure and looking at the need to outsource some of their processes: back in the Philippines there is more of the same English-speaking talent valued by our hospital administrators, hotel and restaurant managers, the merchant marine, and firms running call centres and many more. Further business process outsourcing to the Philippines is an excellent opportunity for an increasing number of British companies. If they do not pursue it, their international rivals surely will.

International support

The strength of Philippine democracy reflects both domestic political realities and overseas support for the country. The Philippines is a country of Asia but has shown itself to be a staunch supporter of Western values, not least since the growth in the threat of international terrorism. Both Western and Asian leaders have praised Philippine resolve against terrorism. The Philippines and we share experience of the devastation to families and a whole region when terrorist action continues over an entire generation. I am not qualified to express a view on where we might place the Philippines in any debate about Asian and Western culture. More experienced hands will have their view. The Philippines attracts no attention, yet might have been an interesting side case study, in the psychologist Dr Richard Nisbett's fascinating work *The Geography of*

*Thought.*¹¹ He does however make the scholarly judgement that the West is not monolithic in the classical distinction between independence of thought, attributed to 'the West', and interdependence of thought, the *Gemeinschaft* of a community's shared sense of identity, attributed to East Asia. I offer just two observations about the Filipino. The first is the importance of family and of family care, much of which we should admire. In our country there are probably 40,000 nurses and care-givers from the Philippines, without whom our health services would be seriously challenged. The Filipina and Filipino have become uniquely valuable and welcome contributors to caring society in this country. Their presence reflects deeply embedded tenets of the national character. One is *pagsasarili*, the principle of self-reliance, self-ownership, that drives the individual to do her or his own thing. The other is the famed *pakikisama*, the spirit of partnership, sharing. Second, that it behoves us as Westerners to respect the Filipino and Filipina for what they are, rather than try to categorize this nation of much talent, charm and hospitality simply as part of the geographical definition of Asia. We might remember that all our democracies are different and the concept itself, as Churchill said in 1947, not perfect or all-wise, just better than all the others. Many Filipino friends who have lived through martial rule will attest to this. Among its friends, the United States has shown a particular regard for its former charge in the Philippines, President Bush paying a State visit in 2003. Japan has been an extremely generous donor and investor for development. Australia has given much support over counter-terrorism. China has engaged in new links. The European Union and Member States have helped significantly over development assistance and counter-terrorism and their private sectors have been the leading foreign direct investors in the Philippines over recent years, notably in the key energy sector. The EU is also engaging in deeper political dialogue with the Philippines and seeks to raise its own visibility. British banks have been in the country for over 130 years and have done an outstanding job supporting the economy. One of their leaders recently was quoted expressing confidence in the Philippines but urging Filipinos to give more credit to themselves and avoid excessive self-criticism. I agree.

Conclusion

If there remains an aspect still to be settled after the Marcosian years and their aftermath, it is in the timeworn debate about the balance between the three pillars of democracy, the legislature in the form of the Congress, the judiciary in the form of the Supreme Court and the administration in the form of the elected leadership in Malacañan Palace. Many democracies have such debate. The present balance was defined in the Philippine 1987 Constitution. Since then, we have observed much discussion about the balance in a post-martial law era, still suffering from conflict and from poverty. There has been a particular debate about the rule of law in business. The Supreme Court has been accused of straying from its adjudicative role into economic policy. But in

his forward to Justice Panganiban's seminal book, *Leveling the Playing Field*, Chief Justice Davide stoutly defended the responsibility of the Court to uphold the rule of law in the playing field, something from which he says legitimate business should benefit, as they would also be the losers from anarchy or self-interest.¹² It should be healthy that, encouraged by the lively Philippine media, debate like this and, as is current, about constitutional reform, should be aired, as it is in many other democracies. But the tone is important, lest political rivalry poison the very democratic base on which the country's stability must rest. If I were to venture a hope for the best results for the Philippine people, it would be that the three branches of government and the fourth estate of the media should find new ways of working together for Philippine economic interests in the highly competitive world, while maintaining their individual, highly legitimate separate powers and spheres of influence.

De La Costa urged his countrymen to forge unity from the diversity that stemmed from Indian spirituality, Chinese humanism, Malay enterprise, Spanish *hidalguía*, Anglo-Saxon technology, animist *bahala na*, Muslim dedication and Christian commitment. That remains the challenge after the political disruptions over the last generation. Friends of the Philippines will continue to encourage the country to make the reforms necessary for discrete progress in governance and the economy, and to move on from damaging politics that can only destroy the image of the young princess and her promise.

NOTES

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