

# Philippine president declares "state of rebellion" and cracks down on opposition

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7 May 2001

Large protests by supporters of ousted Philippine president Joseph Estrada culminating in running street battles with police and the military on May 1, have rocked the newly installed administration of Gloria Macapagal Arroyo. At least four people were killed, 113 injured and more than 100 arrested in what commentators describe as the worst riots since the overthrow of the dictator Ferdinand Marcos 15 years ago.

Just two weeks from national elections, Arroyo seized the opportunity to impose an unprecedented "state of rebellion" in the capital of Manila—an action which, unlike a declaration of martial law, did not require congressional authorisation. She ordered the detention without charge of 11 leading opposition figures, including Senate candidates—Juan Ponce Enrile, Miriam Defensor Santiago, Gregorio Honasan and former national police chief Panfilo Lacson—claiming that they were attempting a coup. Police and the military set up roadblocks throughout the capital and banned opposition rallies.

While the "state of rebellion" was lifted on Sunday, the charges against the opposition figures remain. In the wake of the protests, Arroyo has made clear that she will not hesitate to use the most anti-democratic methods to deal with protests. Speaking after ordering the round-up of her political opponents, Arroyo said: "Last night there was going to be a power grab, but it fizzled out. I was hoping they would act so I could crush them."

Arroyo herself came to power on January 20 in the most undemocratic fashion. Having whipped up "People Power" protests over Estrada's alleged corruption, powerful sections of the political establishment led by former presidents Cory Aquino and Fidel Ramos, big business, the military and the Roman Catholic church ousted Estrada and inserted Arroyo. The whole process was rubberstamped by the Supreme Court and supported by the media and the major powers.

Unlike the "People Power" demonstrations, which were noticeably dominated by sections of the middle class, the pro-Estrada protesters were overwhelmingly drawn from the most poverty-stricken layers of Manila. During the 1998 elections, Estrada campaigned on the populist slogan "Erap [his nickname meaning Buddy] for the poor," appealing to discontent with the previous Ramos administration and its pro-IMF economic restructuring policies.

Estrada is just another venal big business politician who, while in office, also sought to accommodate to the demands of the IMF and World Bank and compounded the country's poverty and unemployment. Nevertheless wide layers of the urban and rural poor are deeply suspicious of Arroyo—a US-trained economist, daughter of a former president and wife of a wealthy businessman—and are hostile to the methods used to remove Estrada.

When Estrada and his son Jinggoy were arrested in a huge police operation on April 25 on charges of corruption, including the capital offence of economic plunder, crowds of his supporters began to gather at the Edsa shrine—the site of the "People Power" protests that led to Marcos's downfall in 1986. Over the following days the protests

continued, culminating in a huge rally on April 29 estimated by police at between 100,000 and 300,000.

The size of the demonstration, which demanded Estrada's release and his return to office, provoked distinct nervousness in the presidential camp. Cardinal Sin took the unusual step of making a special midnight radio and TV appeal to his supporters to go to the Malacanang presidential palace to show support for democracy and Arroyo. A man who only months ago was scheming behind the scenes to oust Estrada, Sin condemned the protests, saying: "It is immoral to grab power. It is immoral to support those plotting against duly constituted authorities."

In the early hours of April 30, Chief of Staff General Diomedio Villanueva issued a statement assuring the public that the armed forces "stands 100 percent, steadfast behind commander in chief [Arroyo]" and "claims to the contrary are plain and simply falsehood and designed to create disorder and sow confusion." The military was put on high alert, the presidential palace ringed with troops and reinforcements were brought in from the provinces. Police prepared to transfer Estrada from a hospital, where he had been undergoing tests, to a maximum security detention centre south of Manila.

No march took place on April 30 but the pro-Estrada protests continued at Edsa. After midnight on May 1, a sizeable number of protesters began the 15km march from Edsa to Malacanang. Estimates of number vary widely but reports put the figure at between 50,000 and 70,000. At one point, some of those involved commandeered a dump truck, armed themselves with sticks and rocks, and broke through lines of riot police. Clashes between police and protestors continued for hours outside the palace.

In the aftermath, the Arroyo administration has attempted to portray itself as the model of restraint and the protestors as a violent mob—paid to attend and, in the more lurid accounts, fired up on drugs. But whatever the machinations of pro-Estrada politicians behind the scenes, the sentiments of the marchers reveal a deep-seated anger at their deteriorating social position and a hostility to the political establishment that Arroyo represents.

A young protestor Hadje Tomolin told the *New York Times* that he had not even voted for Estrada but felt that the president's ouster and jailing violated the constitution. "We will fight until the fight ends. We want Arroyo to step down. She was not elected by the people," he said.

*Time* correspondent Tim McGirk commented: "What we're seeing here for the first time is that the poorest, most marginalised and disenfranchised people are out on the streets, and not because people are paying them. They're there because they thought Estrada was their messiah, and that he had been wronged by the power elite that traditionally rules the Philippines."

What have not been widely reported are the methods used by the security forces to break up the protest. Heavily-armed troops fired volleys of shots into the air and attack helicopters circled overhead. TV footage showed police firing handguns directly at the crowd. One of the dead was

a protester who was shot in the face. On several occasions the police and troops baton-charged the protest and then used tear gas and water cannon to disperse those who came forward again.

The scene resembled a war zone. The streets were littered with burning debris, the personal belongings of the protestors and burnt-out vehicles. Armored personnel carriers and hundreds of elite troops armed with semi-automatic weapons occupied the palace grounds. Clashes between the armed forces and protesters in other parts of the city continued for several hours.

Nevertheless, by the time that Arroyo's spokesman Rigoberto Tiglao announced the "state of rebellion" in Manila, just after noon on May 1, the security forces had the demonstrations under control. The decision was clearly a political one aimed at using the street battles to justify measures against opposition leaders in the lead-up to an election that Arroyo and her allies are by no means certain they can win convincingly.

Just an hour before, National Security Adviser Roilo Golez had announced that there was no compelling reason for the declaration of a state of emergency or moves towards martial law. A factor in Arroyo's abrupt reversal appears to have been a hurried statement of support from the US embassy in Manila recognising the "legitimacy of the Arroyo government," issued just prior to Tiglao's announcement.

At any rate, neither the administration nor the security forces have so far provided any evidence, other than vague references to military intelligence reports, for the claims that the protest was meant to be cover for a military coup.

The reaction in ruling circles to last week's events has been a mixture of outright class hostility and unease over what the protests portend for the future in the Philippines and elsewhere in South East Asia.

In the face of criticisms, Arroyo has sought to justify her actions by denouncing the demonstrators and repeating the claims of a coup threat. "We could have been massacred inside Malacanang by the demonstrators. What would have followed was the collapse of the government," she said over the weekend.

Arroyo's response to the protest highlights the shaky position of her administration—not just in next week's election but in the longer term as she seeks to impose the IMF's economic restructuring agenda, which will only further alienate workers and the poor. She does not have a social base of her own and is increasingly beholden to sections of big business, the church, and the military, who played a key role in inserting her in office and have now put down the pro-Estrada demonstrations.

Her autocratic stand won the fulsome praise of a number of commentators. Greg Sheridan, foreign editor for Rupert Murdoch's *Australian* unreservedly supported Arroyo against "Estrada and the sleazy group of senators supporting him... So far she has handled the crisis well. Tiny as she is, Arroyo is about the toughest pocket battleship in South East Asian politics."

The sentiment was echoed in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, which hailed her ability to weather the "baptism of fire". It stated: "If one firm conclusion can be drawn as the dust settles on the latest crisis to jolt Philippine democracy; it is that Asia has a formidable new leader."

Another fervent supporter of Arroyo's repression was the so-called left in the Philippines—in particular, the Stalinist Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) and its front organisation Bayan. In a press statement on May 1, Bayan denounced "the raging, bloodthirsty pro-Estrada mob now at the foot of Mendiola and the vicinity of Malacanang Palace" and demanded "the immediate arrest of all of its instigators, agitators and financiers."

Throughout the political crisis of the past year, the CPP uncritically supported Arroyo, claiming that she represented a progressive wing of the ruling class as compared to the corrupt Estrada and those business layers who supported him. Having helped her to office, the CPP now hails her state crackdown on sections of the urban poor, who, albeit in a confused

and unclear way, understand that the anti-democratic methods used to oust Estrada will be used to impose tougher economic austerity measures on them.

The emergence of the urban poor onto the streets of the Philippines has already raised fears within ruling circles in Manila and internationally. A number of commentators have pointed to the deep social chasm exposed by the protests and questioned the wisdom of Arroyo's decision to impose a "state of rebellion" and round up opposition leaders. One third of the Philippine population of 75 million live on less than one US dollar a day and surveys have found that almost 60 percent view themselves as poor.

The London-based *Economist* commented: "The arrests were hardly necessary to restore calm to Manila, and there are allegations that they are politically motivated. Edgardo Angara, an opposition senator, who is not among those accused, declared that Mrs Arroyo's decision had 'everything to do with party [politics], rather than the merits'.

"Mrs Arroyo's decision looks even more troubling in light of two recent tendencies. One is the president's persistently tough language—her favourite new word is 'crush'. The other, closely related, is the frequency with which she refers to the united military that stands behind her. Whether or not she is right, this adds to the impression that in a pinch Mrs Arroyo works harder to appear strong than to appear fair. That could prove a sure recipe for a nation divided, whatever happens on May 14."

*Time* correspondent Tim McGirk warned: "[I]t's such a class-based thing, with the middle and upper classes backing Arroyo while the underclass supports Estrada, there is a real fear that if the poor come out on the streets again—and it really won't take much to get them there, particularly since they clearly sensed their power this week—that there could be widespread looting and chaos."

In an editorial entitled "Democracy on the High Wire," the *Washington Post* expressed wider concerns about instability throughout the region. Referring to the Philippines and Indonesia, it wrote: "Two South East Asian nations with a combined population of nearly 300 million people are engaged in political balancing acts that may determine whether democracy survives in their region... In both countries the question is whether weak democratic leaders can cope with daunting challenges without violating democratic norms themselves."

Within the Philippines, sections of the ruling elite have expressed alarm at any further demonstrations of "People Power," particularly if sections of the working class and the poor are involved. A prominent Arroyo supporter, Senator Aquilino Pimentel, is quoted in the *New York Times* as saying: "There is a real danger now that if you mass 100,000 or 1 million people on the streets, it can topple a government... We cannot afford to have a peoples power III or IV in this in this country, it can topple a government."

Behind the rhetoric slung at each other by the Arroyo and Estrada camps, it appears that both sides were deeply shocked that the situation spiralled so rapidly out of control. In fact, there are a number of signs that the protest got out of the control of Estrada camp. His wife, speaking on behalf of the ousted president, opposed the march and his son Jose Ejercito broadcast a radio appeal in the early hours of May 1 for the protestors to go home.

Whatever their bitter differences neither Arroyo nor Estrada are capable of meeting the social needs and aspirations of the working class and poor, and are therefore fearful of precipitating a more conscious movement directed against the profit system and the ruling class as a whole.

In a bid to defuse the tensions, and possibly stitch together a deal, Arroyo visited Estrada in jail on May 3 and chatted amiably with her ousted rival, who in turn addressed her as "Madam President". Until last week, Estrada insisted that he was still the president. The next day Arroyo visited some of the detained protestors. She told them she was "on their side," saying that her father had come from "a family of poor farm workers and my grandmother had to wash clothes."

These theatrical gestures are unlikely to defuse the mounting social tensions and the highly volatile political situation in the Philippines.



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