



Philippines

Assessment: Fair

Trend: ↔

Capital: Manila

Type of Government: Republic

Head of Government: President Gloria

Macapagal-Arroyo (since 20 January 2001)

Secretary of Foreign Affairs: Blas F. Ople

Population: 82,841,518

Human Development Index Ranking 2002: 77

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Philippines has a comparatively **fair** record of support for democracy abroad. Its geographic location in Southeast Asia (a region that until the late 1990s was dominated by authoritarian regimes and established norms of non-interference), status as a developing nation with severe economic problems, and the priority it places on domestic concerns have prevented the Philippines from registering more progress in promoting democracy beyond its borders. For the most part, Manila's foreign policy interests have been dominated by regional issues regarding East Asian economic and military security, and concerns about the safety of its nationals living abroad.

Successive Philippine governments have made tentative efforts, working within the constraints of the ASEAN framework, to incorporate democracy concerns in policy deliberations. And since the early-mid 1990s elements in Filipino society have gradually started to show more interest in strengthening and promoting democracy beyond the country's borders, spurred by developments in Burma and more recently in Indonesia and East Timor.

Still, persisting domestic and international constraints suggest that Manila will not make democracy promotion abroad a major priority in the foreseeable future and instead will continue to focus on security and economic concerns.¹

FOREIGN RELATIONS BACKGROUND

Foreign policy in the Philippines has traditionally been embedded in two different sets of relationships: its bilateral security relationship with the United States, and its multilateral grouping with its Southeast Asian neighbors through the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). The continued dominant role of elites, and the multiple attempts to force extra-legal political transitions, have at times threatened the lauded "tradition" of Filipino democracy and have concentrated policy attention on internal matters, rather than on regional or international ones. Even as the risk of coups has been much diminished in recent years (though President Arroyo's accession to office was not carried out through established legal mechanisms), the focus of most politicians and policymakers remains domestic affairs.

Precisely why have the machinations of the Philippines' domestic situation given rise to a relative lack of interest in promoting democracy abroad? During World War II, the entrenched political elite, with few exceptions, acceded to Japanese demands and held onto power. These same elites maintained power through



several elections in the Old Order period from 1946 to 1965, and the institutions imported en masse from the United States after 1898 began to be altered by the vicissitudes of Filipino political culture. The dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos, stretching from 1972 to early 1986, further weakened the country's democratic inheritance and traditions. Perceptions of Marcos and his wife, Imelda, shifted over time, from symbols of hope and progress to symbols of corruption and decay. Democracy only returned in 1986, with the rise of Corazon Aquino and her People Power movement, but in many ways the restored democratic system was weaker than earlier variants in Philippine history. Still, the new democratic political order proved durable enough, fending off challenges from the military and popularly-elected politicians.

As these various political maneuverings took place over the last 50 years, the same powerful families continued to dominate politics, leading many citizens to feel marginalized. Political violence and corruption are commonplace, especially with regard to elections, which has rendered Manila reluctant to condemn other nations for similar shortcomings in their political system.

Political weakness was compounded by economic underdevelopment. Despite strong growth in the initial stages of the Marcos regime, the country's economy was never as strong as that of its Southeast Asian neighbors, leading some observers to refer to the Philippines as the "sick man of Asia." These problems, in turn, have helped give rise to and made the country vulnerable to persistent domestic insurgencies, dominated by Communist groups and Islamic minorities.

Domestic political problems and insurgencies have forced successive Philippine governments to give short shrift to foreign policy in general and democracy promotion more specifically. Lacking independent foreign policy aims, the Philippines was, for many years, content to rely upon its close ties with the U.S. and its ASEAN neighbors. The Philippines under Marcos was a founding member of ASEAN, an alliance based on ideals of non-interference and consensus, as well as on the communal desire to stimulate economic growth throughout the region. Even as the number of democratic countries in the association has increased markedly, putting democracy as an element of foreign policy on the organization's agenda has proven exceedingly difficult.

By its very nature and given the diplomatic style that predominates in Asia, ASEAN does not

readily lend itself to public criticism of other members.² Additionally, the Philippines was not a forceful actor in the organization, only rarely putting forward any initiatives, well aware that its close ties with the U.S. spawned concerns among its neighbors that Manila was merely a "deputy sheriff." Manila instead preferred to follow the lead of Indonesia, ASEAN's largest member. All told, Filipino criticism of another ASEAN member's lack of democracy was unthinkable before 1990. Even today, Manila's strongest allegiance is to ASEAN, a region that continues to lack an inter-governmental mechanism dedicated to fostering democracy and human rights.

RESPONSE TO OVERTHROW OF DEMOCRATICALLY ELECTED GOVERNMENTS

Given that the Philippines is primarily interested in sub-regional relations (Malaysia, Indonesia, and to a lesser extent, the other Southeast Asian nations) rather than Asia more broadly, and has not been active in democracy promotion abroad, it is not surprising that the government said little and did less in the aftermath of coups in Pakistan and Fiji. President Estrada's only comment with regards to the overthrow of the democratically elected government in Pakistan was an expression of concern for the safety of Filipino workers there. There was no official comment regarding events in Fiji. The ouster of the elected government in Indonesia was considered by Manila to be an impeachment, rather than a coup, a view widely shared by most observers.

In Cambodia, the Philippine government was more engaged as a power struggle threatened to unravel hopes for stability following internationally-supervised post-conflict elections in which ASEAN had invested resources and prestige. The Philippines and Thailand, ASEAN's two leading democratic members at the time and the countries pushing for a more interventionist and open ASEAN³ were the most vocal in calling on the parties to resolve their differences peacefully. Mediation by the ASEAN troika --the Thai, Indonesian, and Filipino foreign ministers-- was one of the most positive examples of Manila's democracy promotion efforts abroad.

Still, ASEAN and the Philippines did not join the U.S. and many other countries in imposing economic sanctions to protest what essentially became a coup. Though many international observers raised concerns about the legitimacy of subsequent elections, ASEAN's bark turned out to be worse than



its bite, and the Southeast Asian nations quickly declared the elections free and fair.

RESPONSE TO MANIPULATION OF ELECTORAL PROCESSES

The Philippines has had a mixed record of response to attempts by foreign governments to manipulate electoral processes, at times speaking out strongly, and at other times remaining silent. In the later half of the 1990s, Philippine governments did in certain instances depart from strict adherence to ASEAN norms of non-interference but the motivation appears to have been more a function of personal relationships and traditional security concerns, rather than any genuine commitment to democracy. For example, Manila got involved in electoral misconduct after the ouster of Anwar Ibrahim in Malaysia in 1998. Upon taking office that year, President Estrada, reportedly furious over the imprisonment of his close friend Ibrahim, issued public statements about violations of Anwar's human rights and threatened to boycott the annual APEC meeting in Kuala Lumpur. As a result, Estrada, who had little prior experience with foreign policy, quickly found himself under fire from opposition politicians for violating ASEAN norms and "interfering in neighbor's affairs." When his predecessor, Fidel Ramos, sat Estrada down and explained Malaysia's importance as an economic partner, and the extent to which ASEAN played a major role in the Philippines' economic and political life, Estrada backed away from his statements and no meaningful action ensued.

The Ramos government, widely considered to have been the most successful in the post-Marcos era, responded to the manipulation of electoral processes abroad by ignoring those cases that had little direct bearing on Philippine economic or security interests. President Ramos was silent about the violent ouster of Indonesian opposition leader Megawati Sukarnoputri from her post as party leader in 1996. When the Ramos government did take a strong stand, as in the case of China's heavy-handed attempt to influence Taiwanese elections in 1996 and the Cambodian election-related power struggle described earlier, it was motivated principally by fears of instability and traditional security concerns rather than democracy considerations per se.

PROMOTION OF INTERNATIONAL DEMOCRACY

The Philippines rarely makes democracy promotion a priority unless other factors, such as stability or cohesion in ASEAN come into play. The Philippines plays a fairly minor role in international fora, and almost always votes with the ASEAN-bloc in the United Nations. As noted above, ASEAN, which prides itself on non-interference, has only occasionally stepped forward to condemn non-democratic domestic political practices anywhere in the world. One important exception, however, occurred when Philippine President Estrada supported Thailand's push for a goal of "open ASEAN societies" as part of ASEAN Vision 2020 -- a document setting out the organization's goals for the next 20 years. The final version of the document/statement (approved by all the ASEAN members) watered down this goal significantly by saying that open societies must be consistent with respective national identities. Nonetheless, this effort marked the push for what is now called "flexible engagement" or "enhanced interaction." This concept, supported by the Estrada government, clearly challenged the norm of non-interference, though new leaders in both the Philippines and Thailand have retreated from this position.

The Estrada government took a fairly proactive stance on the East Timor issue. Before the crisis, he offered to help Indonesia monitor a plebiscite under UN auspices.⁴ While the crisis was forming, Estrada urged all concerned parties to "respect the people's will" and to achieve "a peaceful resolution" in line with the "proper implementation of the results of the 30 August direct ballot."⁵ Moreover, Manila donated US\$200,000 for rehabilitation efforts and contributed 240 soldiers to the UN peacekeeping mission, including high-level and very public leadership figures. However, the Philippines voted against the call for an international inquiry into atrocities carried out in East Timor "because the ROP continues to work within the ASEAN framework" and has "fundamental foreign policy interests" in its relations with Indonesia.⁶

Given its challenging domestic situation and lack of economic or diplomatic clout, the Philippines do not have significant capacity for supporting democracy efforts in the international arena. It has no international development assistance program to speak of; the country remains a recipient of foreign aid. The Philippines has intentionally shunned a leadership role in ASEAN and other fora so as not to irritate its larger Southeast Asian neighbors. And it has consistently made domestic concerns such as ending the Moro Islamic Liberation Front and Abu



Sayaaf insurgencies and revitalizing the troubled economy its top priority. In his annual overview of Philippine Foreign Policy, for example, Interior Secretary Tesofisto T. Guingona Jr. listed the three broad objectives for Manila's foreign policy: national security, national development, and the welfare of overseas nationals. Notably, democracy was not mentioned anywhere in his speech.

It is unrealistic to expect that Manila will suddenly make democracy a significant focus of its foreign policy. However, it is entirely possible that the Philippines will continue to work within the ASEAN framework to contribute in modest ways such as assisting in election monitoring and limited peacekeeping in East Timor.

POLICY TOWARDS ENTRENCHED DICTATORSHIPS

Philippines has a consistently poor record when it comes to policy towards authoritarian regimes, several of which are members of ASEAN. Specific examples include ties with dictatorships in Burma, Laos, Vietnam, and, to a lesser extent, the People's Republic of China. The Philippines also had substantive, if sometimes cautious, relations with Indonesia's President Suharto before he was ousted.

Then-President Ramos met with Burma's junta leader Than Shwe in 1996 and in 1998, when he expressed support for Than's "efforts towards democracy," despite significant NGO protest over the visit. Vietnam and the Philippines have engaged in joint explorations for natural resources and have taken limited steps toward cooperation in sea patrols and educational exchanges. The relationship with the PRC has been less cordial, mostly as a result of serious Philippine concerns about Beijing's intentions in the South China Sea and with regards to Taiwan. In the mid and late 1990s, Chinese military moves in the South China Sea resulted in the "capture" of territory claimed by Manila. Manila appears less concerned with the type of government with which it must deal than with the perceived threats to its security.

All this said, democracy is becoming more of an issue among NGOs and the media. There was substantial outcry before and after Than Swe's 1998 visit – something that would have been highly unlikely just a few years earlier. Despite this change, politicians have yet to respond in any systematic way, suggesting that it will still be some time before democracy abroad becomes an issue of great salience for the leadership of the Philippines.

¹ The period 1992-2002 covers four different governments: Corazon Aquino's government from 1986-1992, which restored democracy after decades of dictatorship by Ferdinand Marcos; the Fidel Ramos regime from 1992-1998, which focused on the "four D's: devolution, decentralization, deregulation, and democratization"; Erik Estrada's short regime from 1998-2001, which marked a departure from Ramos' policies aimed at maintaining regional stability, regardless of democracy; and finally that of Gloria Arroyo, which has returned to a Ramos-esque view of stability and regional economic recovery as of utmost importance. During this period, Manila was silent about the violent ouster of the Indonesian opposition PDI party leader Megawati Sukarnoputri in 1996 as well as the continuing situation in Burma.

² For more on the doctrine of non-interference, see Acharya, Amitva *Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia: ASEAN and the Problem of Regional Order* pg 47. Routledge Press

³ Eng, Peter, "Transforming ASEAN" in *Washington Quarterly*, Winter, 1999, vol. 22 no. 1, pg 53. Eng further clarifies what he means by an "more interventionist and open ASEAN" on pg 54, where he states "noninterference has meant that ASEAN has generally avoided criticizing a member government for its domestic policies, including the way it treats its people, especially in cases relating to democracy and human rights [emphasis added]."

⁴ See *RP Offers to Help Indonesia on East Timor Plebiscite*, Foreign Relations Press Release 2113, 29 April 1999. Taken from www.ops.gov.ph/archives/news/1999/04apr/11/election2113.html

⁵ See *RP Voices Concerns over Bloodshed in East Timor, Calls for Implementation of People's Will*, Foreign Relations Press Release 0611, 6 September 1999. Taken from www.ops.gov.ph/archives/news/1999/09sep/17/foreign%20relations0611.html

⁶ See *Palace explains RP Vote vs East Timor Inquiry*, Foreign Relations Press Release 2912, 29 September 1999. Taken from www.ops.gov.ph/archives/news/1999/09sep/17/foreign%20relations1912.html