

“Theatre of the Absurd? The Philippines Twenty Years After Marcos”

Dr. Astrid S. Tuminez
United States Institute of Peace
June 8, 2006

I. Introduction

I am not an expert on the theatre of the absurd, a tradition which rose after World War II in Europe, but I recently read a note explaining that in many of these plays where life’s meaning is portrayed as absurd, man often feels “bewildered, troubled, and obscurely threatened.” That phrase sums up my feelings about the state of the Philippines twenty years after the overthrow of Ferdinand Marcos.

Marcos’ arguably more notorious half, Imelda, has come up with her own aphorisms to rival those of experts on absurdist theater. In 1982, making a case for holding a huge international film festival in Manila, she said, “The Philippines is in a strategic position. It is both East and West, right and left, rich and poor. We are neither here nor there.”

Notwithstanding the bewildering, troubling, obscurely threatening, and “neither-here-nor-there” nature of Philippine affairs, my task is to try and analyze the path the country has trod in the past twenty years, assess how matters stand today, and conclude—at least tentatively—whether or not this country is forever doomed to an absurd fate, or has hope of shaping a better future for its citizens.

II. FlashBack: Twenty Years of Living Dangerously

If we had a screen showing a flashback of the past twenty years since Marcos was overthrown, the top of that screen might read, “Twenty Years of Living Dangerously.” But in February 1986, when Marcos was overthrown, and in the months thereafter, of course, no one foresaw danger. The future looked bright for the Philippines. The world looked on with nearly hagiographic admiration as Corazon Aquino, widow of the martyred Senator Benigno Aquino, with the backing of about a

million Filipinos on the EDSA highway in Manila, managed to lead the improbable overthrow of the two-decades' old corrupt and brutal dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos. Many might remember the spectacle of the Marcoses being loaded off with all the wealth they could carry onto an American helicopter en route to exile in Hawaii. Then came spectacles of demonstrators traipsing through Malacanang palace, and the discovery of thousands of size 8 ½ shoes, a bulletproof bra, and gallons of perfume left behind by Imelda. These images signaled unbelievable change—the overthrow of the powerful and the rise of the downtrodden. Many believed, then, that a revolution had taken place, a genuine and irrevocable break from a past marked by oppression of the many by the corrupt and powerful few.

Unfortunately, the years since 1986 show that no revolution had taken place. Marcos' downfall was but a brief interlude when Philippine traditional elites became temporarily dazed, but returned later with clear heads, ready to take up where they had left off. This is apparent when one reviews the highlights of administrations that succeeded Marcos.

The presidency of Cory Aquino, from 1986-1992, while laden with hopes, turned out ultimately to be a disappointment. The administration accomplished some things: restoring a more democratic government, recovering some of the Marcos fortune, overseeing a respectable growth rate over a few years, and enhancing the image of the Philippines abroad. Overall, however, Aquino's government turned out to be too weak to reform the Philippine system effectively. The president was unable to capitalize on the popular and international support at the beginning of her presidency to take bold steps that would set the tone for her rule. Her authority was repeatedly challenged by Marcos loyalists, turncoats in the government, and the military. Buffeted by seven coup attempts, her physical and political survival hung in the balance a few times. The fact that, as president, she was unable to get to the bottom of who ordered her own husband's murder, was symptomatic of the limited nature of political change after Marcos. Aquino's land reform program failed. She was unable to reform the army and military, whose long tradition of exercising raw

power and corrupt law enforcement haunts the country to this day. A full accounting of human rights abuses, corruption, and thievery under the Marcos regime never took place. And the judiciary and bureaucracy, which always favored powerful clans and individuals, remained as before. Under Aquino, many of the old, moneyed families of the Philippines who lived high under Marcos continued to prosper and enjoy their privileges—as if EDSA 1986 had never happened. Although some of them initially fled the country, they eventually returned to reclaim their old lives.

After Aquino came Fidel Ramos, whose time in power marked arguably the most hopeful six years in the post-Marcos period. Ramos, though a former member of the Marcos strongmen team, redeemed himself by siding with people power in 1986. Together with then-defense minister Juan Ponce Enrile, Ramos' defection from Marcos in February 1986 sealed the end of the Marcos dictatorship. An engineer by training, a West Point graduate, and a famous workaholic, Ramos had the combined qualities of a competent, skilled, and respected leader. Under his presidency, important reforms occurred. These included the dismantling of monopolies; removing tariffs to enhance competitiveness in the Philippine economy; privatizing government-owned corporations; building and improving roads, bridge, ports and other key infrastructure; negotiating and signing a peace agreement with the largest Muslim insurgency in the southern Philippines,; professionalizing the bureaucracy and mitigating corruption; and launching a new Philippine National Police. Ramos's reforms were not entirely successful. His administration was not immune to accusations of graft and corruption, but, undeniably, it was during his term that many Filipinos felt a resurgent hope. Structural change was taking place and many began to believe that a qualitatively better foundation was being laid for the Philippine future. Alas, all this ended prematurely due to a constitutional restriction, post-Marcos, that allowed presidents to govern for only one term of six years. Ramos did not have the time to carry out more fully the reforms he had in mind. And just as he exited, onto the stage entered the Philippine Robin Hood—President Joseph Estrada, also popularly known as “Erap.”

President Estrada—famous star of 107 Philippine action movies and self-appointed savior of the masses—came into power in 1998 with the biggest margin in any Philippine presidential election. He won 39% of the votes in a crowded field of candidates, and wasted no time dismantling the reforms begun by Ramos. Many analysts credit Estrada with the “return of cronyism and influence peddling.” He restored control over such corporations as San Miguel and Philippine Airlines to his cronies, ended major tax evasion charges against his friends, and allegedly engaged in stock manipulation and insider trading that nearly brought the Philippine Stock Exchange to a collapse. And when his approval ratings dove, Estrada had no qualms about launching an “all-out war” against Muslim insurgents in Mindanao to help resuscitate his authority and reputation. Thirty-one months into his presidency, allegations of corruption and gambling racketeering—specifically, alleged acceptance of US\$80 million in gambling payouts—led to the unraveling of Estrada’s presidency. When his supporters in the Senate refused to open an envelope containing further evidence against Estrada’s illegal activities, the masses in Manila showed their discontent by congregating in a new show of “People Power” on EDSA. The military refused to back Estrada and, in early 2001, the Supreme Court declared then-vice-president, Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, as the Philippines’ new commander-in-chief.

President Arroyo, if she serves out her term through 2010, will be the president with the longest time in power since Marcos: nearly ten years. She served out half of Estrada’s term and won a six-year term of her own. It is too early to sum up her accomplishments and failings, but suffice it to say that the years of living dangerously after Marcos continue also to mark her rule. She is to be credited recently for improving the Philippine fiscal situation, but it is uncertain if her policies—at least the ones she can push through in a sea of opposition—will bring long-term change. Her presidency faces multiple challenges: terrorist bombings, a communist insurgency, a Muslim insurgency, and a military given to occasional rebellion and mutiny. Allegations of cheating at the 2004 polls and accusations of corruption against Arroyo’s husband and son have

weakened her credibility and alienated many citizens. President Arroyo's declaration of a temporary state of emergency in the country in February 2006 was symptomatic of how harassed and besieged her presidency is. It also indicated how the appearance of calm and stability in the Philippines could potentially change drastically within a short period of time.

III. Snapshot of Today: Plus Ca Change . . . ?

Given the legacy of the past two decades, where does the Philippines stand today?

A. Politics

In real ways, the Philippines is arguably better off today than it was twenty years or, more accurately, twenty-one years ago. Positive changes in the sphere of human rights and civil society are perhaps the most striking, albeit marred. There is nothing today that can be compared to the repression, killings, tens of thousands of political arrests, torture, disappearances, and "salvaging" that was routine under the Marcos dictatorship. If anyone needs elaboration on "salvaging," that is the practice of torturing, mutilating and killing people—usually done by politicians, the military, and their goons—and leaving the victims' bodies by the roadside as an example to other would-be troublemakers for the regime. Unlike the Marcos period, today the Philippines has an active free press, an empowered and energetic civil society, and a government that does not exercise violent excesses on the scale of the old dictatorship.

Political gains, however, are offset by unpleasant facts. For example, freedom of the press is seriously undermined by the fact that the Philippines is second only to Iraq as the most fatal place for journalists, with eight killed in 2004 and four in 2005. The most recent fatality in journalism is Fernando "Dong" Batul, a former vice-mayor and radio commentator who was shot twelve times on his way to work in Puerto Princesa City, Palawan, on May 22, 2006. He was the latest among nearly 60 journalists who have been killed in the line of duty since Marcos was overthrown. These

crimes against media personalities, particularly those critical of local politicians, tend to go unpunished; in fact, since 1986, there have only been two convictions of those responsible for the murder of journalists. The human rights situation also is blighted. For example, the constitutionally mandated Commission on Human Rights declared in 2005 that the Philippine National Police was the worst abuser of Filipino human rights!

Philippine democracy is also highly dysfunctional. Political parties are weak, resulting in mercurial political leadership and unfulfilled political programs. Dynasties or political clans and personalities continue to dominate local as well as national politics. The winners of the 2004 presidential and congressional elections illustrate this: seeing the names of Roxas, Osmena, Madrigal, Barbers, Magsaysay, Recto and Macapagal makes it easy to conclude that the same family names merely recycle over decades of Philippine elections. Family political machines continue to be well-oiled and those with access to family fortunes can still fairly easily get themselves prominent positions in the halls of political power. Of course, not all the dynasties are old. Some are relatively new, particularly those representing movie star origins. A good example is the Estrada dynasty, with two members in the 24-member Senate—and a patriarch who was formerly president.

Another sign of dysfunctional democracy concerns participation. Again, the 2004 elections are illustrative: the good news was high voter turnout of 36.6 million or 81.4% of eligible voters. However, violence and corruption marred the process. Approximately 150 election-related fatalities occurred, including 30 that happened the week after the elections themselves. While some politicians and other government affiliates underscored that the greatest threat to elections would come from such renegade groups as the communist New People's Army, the terrorist Abu Sayyaf Group, or the separatist Moro Islamic Liberation Front, it turned out that much of the violence was between local competitors who preferred to shoot rather than fight it out in the electoral arena. In one province, the Board of Canvassers opted to quit in fear of violent reprisal from the incumbent

governor, who was losing the election by 40,000 votes. The winning candidate herself had to go into hiding before she was finally declared the victor.

Corruption was also rampant, with vote-buying and bribery widely observed. Many candidates illegally used government funds, infrastructure and resources to push forward their campaigns. Few, if any, financial or accounting systems were in place to ensure that candidates observed spending limits. Some who campaigned in NPA-dominated areas actually gave money, guns, and cell phones to the communist insurgents in exchange for votes. Finally, the old Filipino practice of “Dagdag-Bawas” (or Add-Subtract) proved alive and well. In one municipality in Sultan Kudarat province in Mindanao, for example, where there were supposed to be only 300 registered voters, the winning presidential candidate was shown to have received over 1,000 votes!

B. Security

The security situation in the Philippines today remains unstable, although arguably not as deplorable as it was under Marcos and other presidents, when hot wars raged between the government and various insurgencies. A key security challenge today is the forty-year old communist insurgency, which has already claimed an estimated 40,000 lives. It is highly ironic that the Philippines is still battling a communist rebellion, when communism for all practical intents has ended in the large sponsor states. In 1990, the New People’s Army was estimated to have between 18-23,000 active members, but these numbers dwindled as a result of government policies and internal NPA purges. Today, an estimated 7-9,000 NPA operatives remain in 69 of the Philippines’ 79 provinces. Their presence practically throughout the archipelago is impressive. The NPA has also proven effective at waging low-intensity conflict. Since January of this year, for example, the Philippine police reports that NPA forces had raided nine police stations, seized 100 weapons, and all without firing a shot. Driven by rural discontent, injustice, police and military brutality, and deep social inequity, it is unlikely that the communist rebellion will fade away soon. And because

the NPA has been listed as a Foreign Terrorist Organization by Washington, peace talks between it and the government have stalled since 2004.

Another challenge to Philippine security is the Moro (the popular term for Muslims in the Philippines) separatist rebellion in Mindanao. This rebellion is over three decades old, has claimed over 120,000 lives, and has cumulatively displaced millions over years of on-and off-fighting. The conflict, according to the UN's latest Philippine Human Development Report, has cost the country an average of PhP5-10 billion yearly since 1975. Although the Philippine government has signed many agreements with Moro rebels—including two major peace agreements in 1976 and 1996 with—the conflict continues because of the absence of effective structures and arrangements to address the Moros' legitimate, long-term grievances. For example, according to the 2005 UN Human Development Report, anti-Moro prejudice among Christian Filipinos remains widespread and powerful in fanning the fires of conflict. The Arroyo administration has been in peace talks with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front or MILF since 2001, and these talks have yielded genuine progress. Foremost is a ceasefire, monitored by Malaysia, Libya, and Brunei, that has lasted for nearly three years now. On the technical front, the Philippine government and MILF peace panels have worked diligently and effectively to resolve thorny issues related to Muslim ancestral lands, control over economic resources, and potential governance arrangements that would give the Moros maximum autonomy. While all of this deserves praise, a critical variable remains the ability of the Philippine government to sign AND, more importantly, implement a potential agreement that is already rousing vehement and serious opposition.

Finally, terrorism by local and foreign perpetrators is yet another challenge to Philippine security. Deadly bombings have become all-too common, including one of the deadliest terrorist attack since 9/11, carried out on a ferry boat in Manila, that killed over 100 people in early 2004. Weak law enforcement, poor intelligence, widespread corruption and incompetence, political rivalries, and a domestic Muslim insurgency that outsiders have exploited are all factors in creating

and fueling terrorism. Philippine counter-terrorism efforts, backed by the United States, have had mixed results. Arrests have been made, but few credible and transparent trials have taken place. In some cases, major terrorists have escaped while in police custody. Bombing of marshes where terrorists are supposed to be hiding have killed people, but not the terrorists targeted. Outright bounties for the heads of wanted terrorists have had some success, but the biggest bounty offered by the United States--\$10 million for Dulmatin, who is alleged to have been behind the Bali bombing of 2002—has not yet yielded fruit.

C. Economy

Many economists applaud the recent direction the Philippines is taking, particularly improvements in the country's fiscal order. The government has collected more taxes, cut expenditures, and lowered the budget deficit. The peso has strengthened and is projected to strengthen yet further in 2006 and 2007. Overseas Foreign Worker (OFW) remittances continue to set record highs, accounting in 2005 for 11% of the Philippine GDP and driving consumption-led growth in the country.

But there is a dark side to the Philippine economy. Corruption is rampant and the playing field in the private sector remains skewed. Transparency International, the watchdog organization on corruption, ranked the Philippines no. 117 out of 159 countries surveyed in 2005—at par with the likes of Afghanistan, Uganda, Libya and Guatemala. This is hardly reassuring. Massive numbers of Filipinos are mired in poverty, with between 40-60% of the population living below the poverty line (defined as living on US\$2 per day). Income distribution remains highly unequal, with the top 10% enjoying nearly 40% of household income and consumption, and the lowest 10% getting only 1.7% of household income. Unemployment at 11% is the highest in the Asia-Pacific region. In a 2004 SWS survey, 34% of Filipinos, a new high, were pessimistic about their prospects in the coming year. In the same survey, 33% of families nationally had inadequate food, while the

number of families experiencing hunger in the conflict-ridden south was 41%. Many families implode socially and emotionally because of the absence of parents who are working abroad to earn money. Pessimism and cynicism abound—this despite the occasional survey that says Filipinos are the happiest people in Asia! Add to this the continued population growth of 2.3% a year. It is sobering to think that the Philippines has had a four-fold increase in population in fifty years from 20 million in 1950 to over 85 million today! These statistics connote that underneath the façade of temporary economic stability and growth are potentially explosive social and demographic factors that could derail long-term stability and prosperity.

IV. Future Redemption: Could the Future Possibly Look Bright?

We come now to a key question: Is the Philippines doomed to a meaningless cycle of mediocrity, to being “neither here nor there”—in Imelda Marcos’ unintended wise phrasing? The reasonable answer is yes. Many Filipinos already feel this way, as evidenced by the number of feet that have exited the country and the 2,500 that continue to exit daily to seek work abroad.

But a hopeful and maybe somewhat contrarian proposition is worth considering. It is this: the Philippines is not doomed because all the country needs is a few good leaders, and a very good one at the top, to tackle effectively some of its most serious problems and maneuver the country onto a better track for peace and prosperity.

In light of this proposition, it is useful to quote former president Fidel Ramos:

Where government is weak, or even failing, is where political will and leadership must come in. Because whatever system of government, whatever the historical experience or the cultural endowments of the country are, it is still the leaders that must carry the ball, see the vision, promulgate the strategy, [and carry out the tactics] so that the nation, the people, the country, can go there.

Ramos astutely pinned down the most critical variable: leadership. Filipinos may be quarrelsome and unruly, their culture may be “damaged,” as James Fallows argued in 1987, and the country may be a mess overall. But—and this is very important—under good leadership, Filipinos have proven

the ability to follow and deliver the goods. Human talent—educated, energetic, and hungry for rewards—abounds in the Philippines. The country is rich in natural endowments, including abundant tourist-worthy sites, mineral deposits (including potentially substantive oil and gas reserves), and fertile land. Yes, the country's problems are numerous and even deeply rooted, but they are not hopeless if good leadership can be found. By good leadership, we need not expect completely virtuous leaders. *They are only figments of the imagination.* Rather, they are leaders who think strategically, act competently, elicit respect from other actors, and create more wealth for the country than they take away.

Let me cite three examples from the national, regional, and local levels.

- 1) At the national level, Fidel Ramos stands out. He was not perfect, but his single, six-year term showed how much positive change can be wrought in the country by one leader with a sharp brain, solid political instincts, and a track record that made his potential detractors respect, if not fear, him. Ramos did not revolutionize Philippine political culture, but changed enough structures and incentives to elicit behaviors that led to positive political, economic, and security outcomes.
- 2) At the regional level, the leaders of Cebu City and Davao City are worth mentioning. Cebu, which is located about an hour south of Manila, has been led for decades by the Osmena clan and a few other families. Taking advantage of powers devolved to local leaders, Cebu's politicians launched a program of impressive growth in the 1980's and 1990's. Cebu was responsible for 10% of all Philippine exports by 1994 and leaders managed to attract a large amount of foreign investment in tourism and in export processing zones. Cebu's Mactan Export Processing Zone alone, for example, grew its clients from ten firms in 1987 to 101 in 2001, employing 36,000 workers. Also impressive is the partnership that Cebuano political leaders have forged with NGO's, which they have tapped to help deliver social

services more effectively to the poor and to help give a voice to the concerns of urban poor communities. The track record in Cebu is not perfect. Problems of corruption and cronyism are plenty, and poverty remains widespread. But development in Cebu in the last two decades has given many Cebuanos employment, hope, and pride.

Davao City's experience is tantalizing, if somewhat perturbing. In the 1970's and 1980's, Davao was a sprawling capital of crime and murder, with the population facing the virulent onslaught of the communist New People's Army, the Moro rebellion, and corrupt and incompetent government and security forces. The tide turned after the election in 1987 of Mayor Rodrigo Duterte, a vigilante for peace and order. Dubbed as "The Punisher," Duterte's regime ignored due process and ruthlessly cleaned the city of its criminal elements, including teenagers who were alleged repeat offenders in robbery or drug-related crimes. Today Davao City has the lowest per capita crime rate in the country. Its economy is growing and its population thriving. Although, on occasion, Davao still witnesses such security setbacks as the bombing of its airport and one of its wharves in 2003, these are rare and have not derailed the city's attraction for businesspeople, visitors, and workers. Duterte served three terms as mayor (nine years total), became a congressman after term limits dictated that he could not run for a fourth mayoral term, and was re-elected again in 2001 as mayor, after taking the requisite break. How much of Davao's progress is due to an individual politician, and how much of it has been sufficiently institutionalized to endure beyond the political life of one person remains a question yet to be answered.

- 3) Finally, at the local level, we can look at Datu Ibrahim "Toto" Paglas, a Muslim leader from the province of Maguindanao in the southern Philippines and a one-time guest here at USIP. My colleague Gene Martin and I once visited the highland village of Bumbaran, a new

frontier in what observers have called the “Paglas experience” on the conflict-ridden island of Mindanao. The Paglas experience refers to the astonishingly successful efforts of Datu Paglas, a Moro chieftain, to turn former areas of ambush, kidnapping, and killing into profitable plantations. The experiment started in Toto’s village, called Paglas, where his family had long enjoyed high status as clan leaders. Using the latest agricultural technology, developed and taught by Israeli technicians, the Paglas plantation produced and exported millions of dollars of bananas to Japan and the Middle East. Muslims and Christians worked side by side and the plantation proved remarkably stable, even when battles raged between the Philippine military and Moro guerillas in 2000 and 2003. Toto Paglas’ vision was to break the cycle of violence in his hometown by providing employment so people could spend their time working rather than settling vengeful scores with enemies—Muslim, Christian, or military.

The first plantation that Datu Paglas started, with a miraculous initial investment from an American investor, could not meet foreign demand, so he looked for land outside his clan’s territory. So he turned to Bumbaran, a village that had witnessed murder and revenge killings, but where the weather and soil conditions were good. Toto thought he could replicate in this place his experiment in peace through economic development. One of his first actions was to facilitate the signing of a peace covenant among local Muslim, Christian, and tribal leaders. He and his colleagues also explained to locals the social benefits that would come with employment and income. When we visited, the plantation had 350 hectares of fertile highland and several hundred workers, with expansion planned to 1000 hectares and over 1,000 workers. Toto and his investors repaired the local mosque and school, and conducted a yearly lottery with winners chosen to go to the hajj in Mecca, all

expenses paid. Winners wept at the first lottery, declaring that they had never in their wildest dreams thought of seeing Mecca.

The story of Datu Paglas shows that one leader could literally change the lives of thousands in an area marked by decades of violent conflict. The original plantation infused US\$450,000 a month into the municipality and created an economy where none existed before. It healed rifts between Christians and Muslims, and allowed Jews from Israel to work side-by-side with Muslims. Crime went down to almost zero in the first years of the plantation, while school enrollment increased dramatically. Leadership with vision and competence made all the difference.

The question now and in the future for the Philippines is whether or not enough leaders will rise to the top who are able to make a difference not only for themselves, their families, and clans, but also for their cities, provinces, and the country as a whole. The Philippines has become a laggard among many countries in Southeast Asia. It cannot afford to stay its current course. Only good leadership will allow the country to realize its tremendous potential, become more competitive, and come out of the rut created by the legacies of the past.