

### **Meanwhile, in Manila...**

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Eight days after September 11, 2001, Philippine President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, like a pilot fish astride a whale shark, became the first Asian leader to endorse the Bush Administration's global war on terrorism. By doing so, she internationalized her country's two internal conflicts, facilitated the revival of US proprietary aims on the archipelago (an American colony from 1899 to 1946) and opened what was then termed the "second front" in the war. Since February 2002, US troops have been deployed on the islands for a series of joint exercises with the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP)--dubbed "Balikatan," or "Shoulder-to-Shoulder"--apparently in violation of the Philippine Constitution, which prohibits the presence of foreign troops in the country (the government contends that the deployment is allowed by the Visiting Forces Agreement of 1998). Just recently, responding to Bush's appeal to the United Nations for help, Arroyo offered to send more Philippine troops to Iraq, in addition to the ninety-five already there as observers.

Arroyo's enthusiastic support for Bush's war, while embarrassing to nationalists, is unsurprising. Philippine leaders have traditionally used the country's strategic location in Southeast Asia to extract economic and military aid from the United States, which has always viewed the Philippines as crucial to maintaining its regional and global hegemony--and to containing China, a prize sought during the heyday of empire, but now a potential superpower rival. Two other factors increase the Philippines' strategic value: a possible US confrontation with North Korea, and the Philippines' claim to the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea, halfway between Vietnam and the Philippines. Surrounded by rich fishing grounds and thought to contain substantial reserves of oil and gas, this desolate stretch is being claimed as well by China, Taiwan, Vietnam, Brunei and Malaysia, either in part or in its entirety. Dispersed over 256,000 square miles, these three-square-mile islands may yet be a flash point between China and the United States, with the Philippines as an American surrogate.

Before 9/11, none of the insurgencies, past or present, that the AFP faced since the country regained its independence in 1946 were ever viewed by Manila as more than internal threats. However, any domestic challenge was seen by the United States as a threat to its own interests as well, mainly to its bases in the country, in exchange for which Washington extended economic and military aid to Manila. Maintaining this cozy, neocolonial vassalage has virtually guaranteed US interference in Philippine affairs. Hence, right after World War II, the AFP quashed the Huk Rebellion, instigated by the Soviet-leaning Partidong Komunista ng Pilipinas (PKP), with CIA assistance organized by the late Col. Edward Lansdale (often considered the model for Graham Greene's *The Quiet American*). Then, in the 1970s and '80s, under the US-backed martial law regime of Ferdinand Marcos, it battled both the Maoist New People's Army (NPA), the armed wing of the Communist Party of the Philippines (the CPP, a breakaway group from the PKP), and the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), a Mindanao-based secular Islamic force.

The latter insurgency has since withered, its leader, Nur Misuari, a former academic, languishing in a military stockade. Today, the AFP continues to face the NPA nationwide, and in Mindanao, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), a fundamentalist Islamic group that split from the MNLF in 1978. Reliable estimates put the strength of each guerrilla army at between 12,000 to 15,000 men under arms.

What have been the effects of war on terrorism in the Philippines? Rather than improve the lives of those directly affected, it has made them worse. The war itself can be regarded as terroristic, particularly in Mindanao, where the army has aggressively engaged the MILF and where the number of internal refugees at its peak rose as high as half a million. In one period alone, from January to October 2002, according to the Ecumenical Movement for Justice and Peace, more than 9,000 civilians were victims of military and paramilitary assaults. Only now, with a cease-fire between the government and the MILF in place, has the tide receded. However, most military encampments lie in civilian areas, putting these residents in danger should hostilities resume. And the economic costs to both the government and the farmers, workers and small entrepreneurs have been staggering--and this in an area that has the country's five poorest provinces, all Muslim.

For nearly a century, until 1992, the United States had two of its largest overseas bases in the country: Subic Bay Naval Base and Clark Air Base. They served as staging areas, billeting, supply and service depots, and R&R sites, as early on as the 1900 Boxer Rebellion in China and during the Korean, Vietnam and first Gulf wars. But the bases treaty was terminated in 1991 by a nationalist Senate keenly aware of colonial history and the more recent US support of the Marcos dictatorship. Aid was reduced, and the Pentagon was forced to rethink its strategy in the region. But 9/11 has allowed both governments a way of exploiting other ends--one regional and global, the other local.

The Pentagon can once again use the archipelago as a springboard for intervention, or what it euphemistically terms "stability

operations," which are implied under the 2002 Mutual Logistics Support Agreement (MLSA), the latest of three military covenants between the two countries. The MLSA grants US forces access to Philippine military facilities throughout the country, converting the whole archipelago into a virtual base for the Pentagon, without being tied down to reserved areas that would once again leave the United States open to charges of permanent tenure.

Having a renewed military presence in the country also enables the Pentagon to keep tabs on Muslim and communist insurgencies, and links that both governments suspect the MILF has with fundamentalist groups such as Jemaah Islamiyah in Indonesia--links the MILF denies having. (With peace talks between Manila and the MILF to be held after the Organization of the Islamic Conference summit on October 16-18 in Malaysia, neither government has branded the group as terrorist--allowing the United States to support the talks and counter its global image as an arrogant warmonger.) The truth is somewhere between: Given the history shared by MILF and other Southeast Asian mujahedeen in fighting the Soviets in Afghanistan, and porous sea borders between Indonesia, Malaysia and Mindanao, there are probably ad hoc ties between the different groups, but no formal arrangements.

For Arroyo and the AFP, internationalizing long-running domestic insurgencies and recasting them as terrorist threats to an ill-defined world order has meant tapping into US aid once again. At the outset of the Balikatan exercises, the Bush government promised \$100 million in mostly military aid. Last May, after a visit to Washington, Arroyo was promised an additional \$356 million in aid. And to show support for the peace talks between the government and the MILF, the US Congress has earmarked \$30 million this year for use in Muslim Mindanao, while USAID promises \$20 million for next year.

Playing the subaltern in the war on terrorism has also enabled the Philippine military--essentially formed during the US colonial period--to push its own agenda to the forefront. Under Marcos, the size of the AFP increased dramatically, from 57,000 to 274,000 (including a paramilitary force of 65,000). With the ouster of the dictator and his shoe-loving wife, Imelda, in a 1986 bloodless revolution known as People Power, and with the decline in US military aid, the AFP's size has shrunk to 127,000. The 2004 budget for the army, air force and navy is less than \$1 billion, hardly adequate given the decrepit state of much of its equipment, from aging M-14 and M-16 rifles to outmoded fighter planes, and the starvation wages of soldiers (though the government will raise their wages to the level of policemen's and public schoolteachers' salaries, which is still low but not absurdly so). Grunts and lower-level officers have a litany of complaints, ranging from meager meal allowances to inadequate clothing and faulty weaponry. But the one that saps morale the most is that of corruption at the top.

A 2001 study of military corruption by the nonprofit Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism (PCIJ) found that as much as 35-50 percent of military funds goes to kickbacks. Widespread malfeasance in high places was in fact one of the major charges leveled against the government by a group of 350 mutinous soldiers, led by junior-grade officers, who mounted a failed coup attempt this past July 27. (The men later denied any intent to seize power--a claim likely meant to reduce criminal charges against them but which flies in the face of seized documentary evidence detailing, among other things, the creation of a military junta.)

The officers accused their superiors of "selling bullets and arms from the government arsenal" to their enemies and of orchestrating recent bombings in Davao City--acts that have been blamed on the MILF but that the MILF denies committing--in order to receive antiterrorist funds from the United States. While the putsch was universally condemned, the officers' allegations drew widespread sympathy. Even AFP officials admit to corruption in their ranks. As one local journalist put it, waging war and getting money from the United States "is an industry."

Coup attempts are nothing new, and they have their roots in the politicization of the military, which began under Marcos, when military commanders amassed both power and wealth. A politicized AFP clearly represents a greater threat to the Arroyo government than either the MILF or the NPA. As for the Abu Sayyaf, the initial target of the first Balikatan exercise, the group served as a convenient foil, being, as even the Philippine government has stated, a small though extremely violent kidnap-for-ransom gang that does not and never did constitute a destabilizing threat to the Philippine government, much less to the United States [see Walden Bello, "A 'Second Front' in the Philippines," March 18, 2002].

Ironically, Marcos's 1986 downfall was precipitated by a military revolt, leading to People Power. The government of Corazon Aquino, who succeeded Marcos, was threatened by seven failed coups, one of which, in 1989, came dangerously close to toppling her. Fidel Ramos, her successor, is himself a retired general, a leader of the 1986 revolt and military chief of staff under Aquino. No military threats erupted during his six-year tenure. In 1995 he granted blanket amnesty to military rebels involved in various coup attempts. (The amnesty may have backfired, for one of those pardoned was Gringo Honasan, currently a senator, who went into hiding for a month after becoming a prime suspect in the July 27 coup attempt. The senator, implicated by the mutineers, has vowed to prove his innocence.)

Ramos's successor, Joseph Estrada, exited in disgrace late in 2000 when, in the midst of impeachment proceedings, the AFP withdrew its support from his government--a coup of sorts. Arroyo, Estrada's veep, was shaken by the July 27 attempt, for she has assiduously cultivated her relationship with the military. Even as her administration confronts two well-armed guerrilla groups, she needs to watch her back. An unspecified number of soldiers associated with the failed July rebellion are still at

large. And the escape in July of the Indonesian Fathur Rohman al-Ghozi (a self-confessed member of Jemaah Islamiyah convicted in 2000 for the bombing of a Manila train and other targets) from a maximum-security military facility smacked of payoffs and sparked fears that renegade groups have sympathizers in the military.

The war on terrorism is as much one of words, centered on the label "terrorist." It can mean, as a character in Alice in Wonderland would have it, anything its user chooses it to mean. Marcos, according to Sheila Coronel, PCIJ's executive director and this year's Ramon Magsaysay awardee for journalism, was fond of pairing it with "communist" and "subversive" to tar anyone who opposed his regime. José Lacaba, a poet, journalist and former political prisoner under Marcos, believes both Bush and Arroyo "by their wholesale labeling are blurring the distinction" between ideologically driven groups like the NPA and the MILF, with their military targets, and a criminal gang like the Abu Sayyaf, which uses Islam as a cover for mayhem.

Reflecting on the warm welcome US troops got on the island of Basilan, a center of activity for the Abu Sayyaf, Coronel points out that Basilan has a fairly large Christian community. And, she says, alluding to the charges that the military units in pursuit of the Abu Sayyaf were on the gang's payroll, "Many Filipinos felt that the military was in cahoots with [the Abu Sayyaf], then why not have US involvement? People were sick and tired of the Abu." But she doubts that US troop presence in Mindanao will work: "That's very different. Memories of the Moro-American war are still very strong," referring to the campaign to pacify Mindanao that formed part of the brutal 1899 Philippine-American War. Muslim Filipinos still remember atrocities committed by American troops, such as the 1906 massacre of 900 largely defenseless Muslim men, women and children in Mt. Dajo, predating My Lai by more than half a century. Estimates of Filipino war casualties range from at least 250,000 to a million mostly civilian lives lost, compared with more than 4,000 American deaths.

As for resumption of peace talks with the MILF, President Bush, according to Ricardo Saludo, deputy spokesman for President Arroyo, hoped to witness the signing of a peace pact in time for his October 18 visit--an irresistible photo-op, now out of the question, where the Great White Father could have brought together two fractious children. But what exactly can the government offer the MILF? Not much, says Raul Rodrigo, columnist for the daily Today, who points out that the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM), created in accordance with a 1996 peace agreement with the now-defunct MNLF, is already in place. "There's really nothing left for the MILF." Expanding ARMM will be exceedingly difficult, since Christians now outnumber Muslims outside of ARMM areas.

Militarism has never worked in Mindanao, or elsewhere in the country. The twin insurgencies have their historical roots in legitimate grievances: landlessness, lack of economic and political power, and human rights abuses--grievances that date to Spanish colonial times. An army major, a former intelligence officer and veteran of the counterinsurgency wars, who agreed to be interviewed on condition of anonymity, admitted that what the AFP is doing "won't solve the problem. Insurgency is really a war of issues, not armed conflict. We need to look at the causes of the guerrillas' strength and focus on organizing, depriving them of their mass base," particularly in the case of the NPA, which he regards as the more intractable foe.

The focus on the MILF obscures the ongoing thirty-four-year-old conflict with the NPA, even as the guerrilla army has stepped up its attacks on army and police units. Talks with the National Democratic Front of the Philippines (NDFP), representing the NPA and the Communist Party of the Philippines (whose head, José Maria Sison, lives in exile at The Hague in the Netherlands), which have occurred in fits and starts since the late 1980s, are currently logjammed. The United States has labeled the NPA a terrorist organization, a status the NDFP would like to see lifted, even though Washington hasn't linked it to any foreign group. Spokesman Saludo says the Arroyo government has nothing to do with this, though it certainly hasn't objected to it either, raising the question of whether the government is serious about resuming talks with the country's oldest guerrilla army.

The militant left has declined somewhat from its heyday during the Marcos regime and Aquino's tenure. Randy David, eminent political scientist, newspaper columnist and professor at the University of the Philippines, says that in reaction to Ninoy Aquino's assassination in 1983, a middle-class opposition to Marcos emerged to marginalize the CPP-NPA-NDFP, a process that was accelerated when the left boycotted the elections of 1985--and one that culminated in the ouster of the Marcoses and Corazon Aquino's presidency. David concludes that "the left hasn't recovered from that." Nevertheless, with conditions worsening in the rural areas, the CPP-NPA-NDFP's insistent focus on agrarian reform and more equitable governance and distribution of wealth continues to appeal to large segments of the population. The stepped-up attacks against government forces signal President Arroyo that the NPA hasn't gone away.

One nonmilitaristic way the United States could help the Arroyo government combat these two insurgencies is by forgiving a substantial part of the country's \$60 billion foreign debt. The Philippines spends nearly a third of its budget just servicing this debt, moneys that could otherwise stimulate the economy and reduce the more than 50 percent poverty rate--still the single best recruiter of angry young militants. Of course, Manila needs to root out corruption in government, a sordid reality that in the long run wreaks more havoc than any insurgency.