

Gloria and God in the Philippines

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Mounting popular calls for President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo's resignation on corruption charges have sharply divided the Philippines' politically powerful Roman Catholic clergy into pro- and anti- government camps.

Now new charges that the embattled premier may have curried favor with certain influential religious groups with alleged secret cash handouts threaten to further escalate the political conflict and sully the clergy's reputation as a source of moral authority amid the country's rough and tumble politics.

Numerous scandals have stuck to Arroyo's administration, starting with her alleged rigging of the 2004 elections, the alleged use of the country's fertilizer fund to finance her campaign drive, and now charges that her husband and a close political associate received millions of dollars worth of kickbacks on a US\$329 million state broadband Internet infrastructure deal tendered to the Chinese-run ZTE Corporation.

The tainted project has since been canceled, but the political controversy has intensified through a series of raucous anti-government street protests and the widely respected Catholic clergy now finds itself uncomfortably caught in the middle. The Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippine (CBCP), a collegial and influential body of 131 top bishops, after a marathon emergency meeting in late February, failed to support the political opposition's and civil society groups' calls for Arroyo's ouster.

A statement released from that meeting said that while the bishops broadly condemned corruption, which they concurred had reached the president's office, the religious group would stop short of calling on the president to step down. They did, however, ask the president to repeal Executive Order 464 - which she has since done - which barred government officials from testifying before an ongoing Senate inquiry into the botched infrastructure deal without her permission.

The CBCP's seemingly contradictory statement on top-level corruption came as a surprise to many Catholic devotees, which apart from spiritual guidance have looked on the clergy for moral guidance during times of political confusion. There is a growing sense among some Filipinos that the clergy's political judgment could be clouded by government money doled out to church donation boxes. While the CBCP has long condemned all forms of gambling, casino and lottery revenues are often distributed to influential bishops and church groups.

However, a controversial CBCP meeting in 2006, where an envoy to the Presidential Palace reportedly handed out envelopes full of cash to the group's bishops, has now awakened large sections of the population to the extent of Arroyo's possible patronage to the clergy.

Charges, unsubstantiated, of money changing hands now hound Arroyo every time she meets with influential clergy members, including when a group of priests from her home province encircled and spoke special prayers to her the day before an interfaith mass rally on February 29.

At no point in the Philippines' modern history has the Catholic clergy been so politically divided. Bishops have openly debunked each other's political views, including Bishop Juan de Dios Pueblos, an influential clergyman from Butuan province and member of the CBCP, who warned the head of the clergy, Iloilo Archbishop Angel Lagdameo, that he stands to get ousted from his post for airing anti-government statements without prior consultation with the CBCP.

While the CBCP has released a number of pastoral statements during its biannual meetings, stating the clergy's position on the various scandals involving Arroyo, it was the first time that the so-called Mindanao and Northern Luzon blocs of the clergy had come out to express their all-out support for Arroyo. That unified regional stand from the two influential blocs was unprecedented, according to church sources.

On the other side of the godly divide, priest Robert Reyes, a well-known Arroyo critic, has said that the CBCP's refusal to take on the voice of the people in opposition to the government has "reduced the clergy to irrelevance". Several senior clergy members were seen in attendance at recent mass anti-government interfaith prayer rallies held in Manila, including CBCP leader Lagdameo.

Archbishop Oscar Cruz, a former CBCP president, said recently that the division among the clergy is "not a question of faith and morals, where we are united, but of a judgment call on the ethical dimension of a government". Bishop Broderick Pabillo, meanwhile, was seen at the February 29 interfaith rally, but refused to go on stage or entertain media interviews.

Pabillo, head of the CBCP's social arm, sat beside Rodolfo Noel Lozada Jr, the opposition's whistleblower in the ZTE corruption case, when he first presented himself to the media after coming out of hiding in Hong Kong due to concerns for his personal safety.

The fractured clergy marks a stark contrast to the pivotal role men of the cloth played in mobilizing the masses in 1986, when so-called people's power rallies overthrew Ferdinand Marcos' authoritarian and corrupt government. Then the clergy rallied around the straight-talking Archbishop Jaime Cardinal Sin, who emerged as a force of moral authority for the disenfranchised masses; today, no such charismatic figure has emerged to check or challenge Arroyo's legitimacy.

Friends in high places

That's in part because Arroyo has deftly played the religion card. The Philippines is a predominantly Catholic country and senior bishops have in the past flexed their moral authority to affect political outcomes, including elections and crucial laws and legislation.

But a series of controversial incidents, many involving financial links to Arroyo's administration, has called the clergy's own legitimacy into question. Nueva Vizcaya Bishop Ramon Villena recently admitted in a newspaper report that the Philippine Charity Sweepstakes Office (PCSO), the lottery run by the Office of the President, had given him 1.6 million pesos (US\$39,000) to build a hospital for the poor in his home province. However,

the total assistance given to Villena's province, according to the report, was 3.2 million pesos.

The report also showed that the Catholic Church-run Radio Veritas received more than 2 million pesos in ad placements from the PCSO, which while not necessarily a new development, represented a huge increase in the amount of government funds doled out for similar initiatives in the past.

"That gifts or money would blind the eyes of bishops and seal their lips to gross corruption when solidly proven would be a tragic contradiction to their experience as pastors at Edsa I and Edsa II," said Cotabato Archbishop Orlando Quevedo, a former CBCP president, referring to the clergy's participation in past people's power movements which overthrew corrupt governments.

The CBCP's current president, Lagdameo, while quiet on previous scandals involving Arroyo and despite the issuance of carefully worded joint CBCP statements, has personally attacked the embattled premier since the ZTE scandal broke out. Two of his statements called on the people to engage in "communal action" and get involved in a "brand new people power", which was interpreted by many as calling for a new people's power movement. Lagdameo's statements were strongly criticized by pro-Arroyo bishops.

Before Lagdameo took the CBCP's helm, its previous leader, Fernando Capalla, was a personal friend to Arroyo. Church insiders say that Capalla, who also sat as one of the government's peace negotiators in talks with Muslim secessionists, was frequently escorted by presidential guards from the airport whenever he flew into Manila.

It was thus notable, some say, that during Capalla's tenure when explosive vote-rigging charges against Arroyo broke that the bishops did not support calls for her resignation or impeachment. When a government agent who claimed responsibility for wiretapping a conversation between Arroyo and a senior election official in 2004 in which the two appear to have predetermined vote counts for various constituencies across the country took refuge at a Manila seminary, Cardinal Gaudencio Rosales ordered that he be turned over to the military.

Rosales, who is a relative to one of Arroyo's closest aides, has admitted in press interviews that he has received a 1 million peso donation from the Presidential Palace for his various livelihood projects targeting Manila's poor populations. As successor to the incorruptible Cardinal Sin, many Filipinos have looked on Rosales to be a strong voice against government abuse.

Cebu Archbishop Ricardo Cardinal Vidal, who was the CBCP's president when the clergy called for a civil disobedience campaign after Marcos rigged the results of 1986 snap elections against Corazon Aquino, has likewise shot down calls for the clergy to endorse Arroyo's resignation. Despite his key role in orchestrating Marcos' ouster, the senior clergyman has said a declaration against Arroyo is beyond the clergy's authority and should be left to the political opposition.

Where bishops have failed to take a unified stand, Catholic nuns notably have in their statements and actions. For instance, they have stood guard around Lozada, the key opposition witness in the Senate inquiry into the ZTE scandal, to provide divine protection against possible assassination - a move that evoked images of activist nuns holding rosaries

and blocking military tanks during the Philippines' first people's power revolution in 1986.

Most of the nuns belonged to the Association of Major Religious Superiors of the Philippines, a network of 200 congregations with a long track record of involvement in national sociopolitical issues, dating to the period of martial law in the 1970s. But then, as now, the nuns lack the clout of the bishops, which Arroyo has effectively divided and ruled to her political advantage.

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